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PENNY HAMPSON

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PENNY HAMPSON

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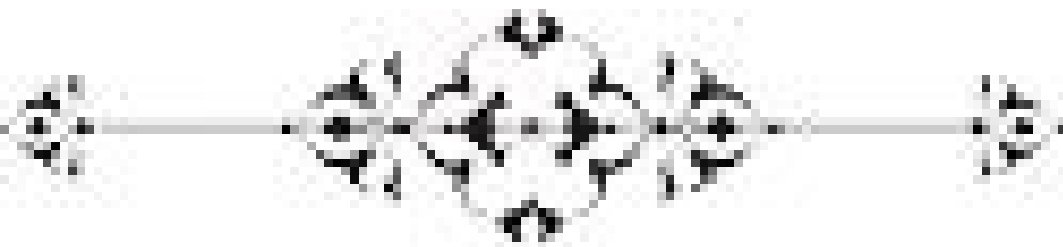
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*For Mike, Peter, and Zoe - Thank you for all your encouragement and support.*

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# Chapter 1



MAJOR NATHANIAL CRAWFORD WAS low – absolutely blue-devilled in fact – and certainly not paying attention as he rode towards Oxford. What reason was there for feeling pleased about returning home for good? Ignoring the clouds scudding across the sky and the teasing, weak April sun, he took in a deep breath, inhaling the crisp spring air.

*At least I'm still alive and breathing. If only this damned leg would stop aching.*

His route was bordered by dense hedgerows, with bare ploughed fields spreading out beyond. A commotion in the hedgerow to his right alerted him to something amiss, but too late. Before he could react, his horse – a battle-trained veteran like himself – uncharacteristically reared up, taking him by surprise.

'Steady, Max, steady.'

Gripping with his knees and holding onto the reins, Nate tried to control and calm the unnerved beast. He couldn't see what had startled his mount. All his concentration was on settling Max. Frustratingly, his left leg wouldn't co-operate; he was losing his grip. The world was tilting. *Damn and blast it!* Max reared up again and Nate parted company with the saddle, releasing the reins as he threw himself clear. The irony of the situation was not lost on him: to have escaped mortal injury in the heat of battle only to end up getting trampled by his own horse on a quiet back road in Oxfordshire.

*No more than I deserve.* That wry thought was his last before his world darkened and he lost consciousness.



The world was gradually returning. As the blackness receded, he heard a voice, a gentle, soft-toned voice, but whoever was speaking sounded anxious. He should open his eyes. Someone took his hand. Whoever it was had velvety skin, like a child's. He made the mistake of moving his legs and a wave of pain swept through him, causing him to groan and his body to stiffen. He took a deep breath, not permitting the pain to defeat him. He opened his eyes, blinking against the light. The world slowly came into focus. The person who was kneeling at his side he could see only in silhouette, her features obscured by the brim of her bonnet.

'Sir, are you all right? Where are you hurt? Do you think you can stand?' she asked.

*Her voice is pleasant*, he thought, smiling to himself. *Why the hell am I thinking about her voice?* God, his leg. Had he re-opened his old wound? It felt like the very devil.

'I'm sure I'll be fine shortly,' he lied. 'Just give me a moment to regroup and then I'll attempt to stand. Mistress...?'

'Miss Benham, sir,' she answered. 'If you're sure you can manage, I'll be on my way then.' She dropped his hand and for some inexplicable reason he felt abandoned.

'I didn't say I could stand unaided, Miss Benham,' he barked out. He didn't want her to go. Who knew if he could stand? If left on his own, he could be stranded like a beetle on its back, unable to right himself. Besides, she sounded afraid, eager to get away. Surely she wasn't frightened of him? Or, if not him, of whom? Despite his own problems, his curiosity was piqued.

'I'm sorry, of course I won't leave you if you require help. Would you like me to assist you to sit up?' she asked, her tone somehow reluctant.

'That would be much appreciated, Miss Benham.' He attempted a smile but was sure it must look more like a grimace. He didn't want her to run away. He felt her arm gently curl around his shoulder and he lifted his head; that wasn't too bad. Her breath tickled the back of his neck, like the gentlest of zephyrs. She helped him to a sitting position. Her arm against his back and the proximity of her body was wonderfully comforting. He hadn't been this close to a female in months, not a respectable one anyway. He didn't know why, but he was very certain that Miss Benham was a respectable young lady.

'There. Would you like to attempt to stand now, sir?' She took her arm away and settled back on her heels. He still couldn't see her face clearly, obscured as it was by the rim of her bonnet. To allow some time to deal with the pain in his leg, and before making a fool of himself trying to stand, he deflected her question.

'I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Nathaniel Crawford, late major of His Majesty's 23rd Light Dragoons,' with a flourish of his hand, 'at your service, Miss Benham.' He smiled in the direction of her face and heard her answering giggle. He continued, eager to keep her mood light; she had an engaging giggle, not false and simpering like some young women, but genuinely warm and

amused. 'I know, I know, I'm not much use to anyone at the moment, but once I'm on my feet I'm happy to render you any assistance you require, Miss Benham.'

He sensed her uncertainty and made an effort to keep his face impassive. He heard her take a deep breath.

'If you truly mean that, Major Crawford, I would be glad of some assistance if you are in a position to help me. If not, I'll bid you goodbye as soon as you are back on your horse and I'll be on my way.'

Well, at least someone thought him worthy of trust.

'Of course I meant it, Miss Benham. Like you, I would not leave someone in distress. I can assure you I'm an honourable gentleman and will see you safely restored to your family.'

He sensed her stiffen and saw the subtle withdrawal as she stepped backwards. So, she was running away from family. Why? She looked a sensible sort from what he could tell of her sober dress. Despite the mud spots and an ugly rip in her skirt, her clothes were well made. She didn't sound like a giddy young girl. 'Why don't you tell me what you do require of me, Miss Benham? I take it that you do not wish to return to your family?'

Her voice was soft though her words were decisive. 'I prefer not to say at the moment, Major Crawford, but I assure you I am of age and in possession of all my faculties. I'm not eloping or any other such nonsense. I merely wish to stay with a very dear friend. She is a mature lady of impeccable morals. It just so happens that I'd prefer certain... distant... relatives not to know of my intentions.'

Well, what else could he do? He guessed there was far more to her story, but he wasn't going to push her for details. She sounded intelligent and calm, but there was a slight tremor in her hands as she clasped them together in front of her. So not as calm as she was pretending. She was a damsel in distress, and who could resist one of those? Certainly not he.

Life for the most part had been tame since leaving Portugal – he refrained from thinking about his dark days on the ship homeward. He'd enjoyed a brief surge of excitement helping his friends whilst in London, but now there was nothing much in the way of adventure to look forward to. He'd been resigned to returning to the life of boredom that surely beckoned on his father's estate. A life of loneliness, boredom, pain, and... worse things. Better not think of that. That was his future. But not yet. He was still capable of some things. He craved excitement. He needed distraction from his pain. Besides, he enjoyed mysteries and Miss Benham had a mysterious air about her. Yes, of course he would help her.

'I will be happy to escort you to your friend's home, Miss Benham. But first... if you could help me to stand, I'd be eternally grateful. It's quite cold and damp here on the ground and I have a problem with my leg.' Hearing her gasp, he quickly added, 'Don't worry, not your fault. I was wounded at Talavera. It's taking an age to mend.' He gave her what he hoped was a disarming smile.



‘Of course, I’m sorry, how bird-witted of me. Here, take my arm.’

She came near him, putting one arm round his shoulder again and taking his right arm so that he could brace himself to rise. Stifling a curse as pain shot through his leg, with her help he managed to get upright. His forehead was damp with perspiration. He was breathless both from the effort of rising and from the warm sensation of leaning against her body. She was deliciously soft, and her hair smelled of rosemary. She too seemed a little breathless. No doubt he was too heavy for her slight frame. He clicked his tongue and his horse trotted towards him. The animal knew what was expected of him, standing perfectly still as Crawford pulled himself back into his saddle.

He watched as Miss Benham walked over to pick up his hat and retrieve her small valise, which fortunately seemed to have suffered no damage. He turned the horse towards her and stretched out his hand. ‘Come, get up behind me,’ he ordered. ‘If we take it steady, I believe we can make it to Oxford. Once there, I can send a message to my father to come and collect us.’ He had to stay in the saddle until Oxford, there was no question about it, despite the agonising pain.

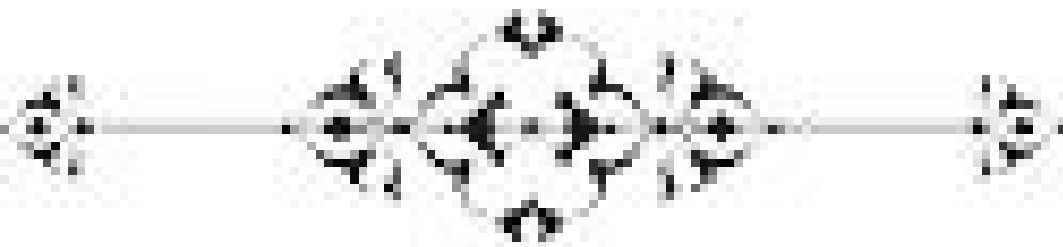
After a moment’s hesitation, she took his proffered arm and he was surprised at how easy it was to pull her up behind him. He’d been gritting his teeth in preparation, but she was no weight at all. He felt her arms round his waist, holding on to his coat.

‘That’s right, hold tight. You’ll be safe with me, Miss Benham. I vow I’ll look after you.’ He meant it. He’d given his word. His honour as an officer demanded he kept it. He had to redeem himself. Better men than he had perished at Talavera. He had to prove he was worthy of survival.

What was he getting himself into? Could he be accused of kidnapping? He felt her arms suddenly tense as if she could read his thoughts, then he felt her wriggle. No, it seemed she was just settling herself into a more comfortable position. If it wasn’t for the grindingly awful pain in his leg, requiring all his efforts not to moan out loud, he would quite enjoy having a softly rounded woman’s body pressed so closely to his. But this was a gently bred young lady – Miss Benham was no lightskirt.

To take his mind off matters carnal and painful, he peered towards the horizon. The spires of Oxford were just in view. It shouldn’t take more than another hour and they would be there. How he longed to rest in a comfortable bed and take the weight off his leg. Riding was an effort, and it had taken him weeks into his recovery before he felt safe again on a horse, but this fall had definitely upset things. His stomach lurched at the possibility that the bone had dislodged and all his hard-gained mobility would be lost. He’d seen amputations on the battlefield and dreaded that he might be forced to suffer the same. He drove the unwelcome thought out of his head and focussed on staying upright.

# Chapter 2



WHAT HAD SHE GOT herself into? Here she was seated behind a stranger, heading off to Oxford when she'd barely set foot off her father's estate before. She'd been in a quandary earlier, not knowing what to do. Should she leave the rider on his own, perhaps to die, or stay around till he recovered his senses and risk being seen and losing her one chance to escape? Foolish question; she would never leave someone in need of help, no matter the cost to herself.

He'd been lying on his side, his left leg at a strange angle, which had made her stomach churn. Well dressed, with a coat of dark blue superfine and buff-coloured riding breeches tucked into glossy leather boots, his beaver hat lay some distance away. Clothes that told her he was a gentleman. Close to, his weather-beaten face had the drawn look of someone who frequently suffered pain. He looked to be in his thirties. His eyes had been closed but the lines at each corner were evidence that they were regularly narrowed from either wincing or laughing. Which? His dark glossy hair curled around the collar of his jacket and flopped across his brow. His nose was straight and aquiline, reminding her of the likeness she'd seen of the recently elevated Viscount Wellington, commander of the army on the Peninsula. Yes, she could well imagine this gentleman commanding troops into battle, leading from the front.

Awake or unconscious, and despite his injury, the major was very imposing. His shoulder muscles had been firm beneath her hand when she'd helped him stand. She'd discerned nothing wrong with his right leg as she watched him stretch and strain to stand up. He was strong, of that she had no doubt. She'd been surprised at how easy he made it seem to pull her up behind him. Now, close up, he smelt nice too, clean and male, unlike that overpowering unpleasant fragrance of Cousin Jonah's that she'd caught a whiff of as he tried to paw her the other night. No, she would have no qualms about breathing in Major Crawford's masculine scent. Lord, she'd never been this close to a man before. She blushed at her thoughts. This would never do. She couldn't allow herself to be swept along with the major's wishes just because he was accustomed to being obeyed and she was too bird-witted to resist.

'Major Crawford, you're welcome to let me dismount here and I will make my

own way into Oxford,' she ventured. 'I'm sure it will be easy for me to find my way to the stage, and I understand that the Birmingham coach is very reliable.'

His answer came swift and terse. 'No, I cannot permit that, Miss Benham. Of course you cannot go off on your own. I've told you my plans and that is what we will do.'

Good Lord, he was talking to her as if she were an unruly raw recruit. She quelled her first angry retort and remembered that he was accustomed to issuing orders to subordinates. She supposed part of his abruptness was also due to the pain he was suffering. He'd reached down several times on their journey to massage his leg, and she was certain he'd groaned when his horse had taken a misstep and jolted them both.

She tried to sound reasonable. 'Of course, Major Crawford, but do you not think it will look a little odd for us to enter Oxford in such a fashion? Someone is bound to take note, and I'm concerned that m-m-my... that the person who I do not wish to find me will be able to discover my whereabouts.'

'You're quite correct, Miss Benham. I've decided that we should present ourselves as husband and wife. We can say our carriage overturned and that I had to take you up behind me.'


'B-b-but...' Goodness, this was getting worse and worse. She didn't know how she could extract herself without causing scandal. What was he thinking? She was not a natural liar, not having had much reason to dissemble in the past. Apart from the lies she had recently had to tell to keep from her cousin's clutches, telling untruths caused her great discomfort. Yet the major seemed so practised... had he done this sort of thing before?

'But me no buts, Miss Benham.' His curt tones cut into her thoughts. 'Follow my plan, and my father will soon be able to fetch us discreetly from Oxford in the family coach and no-one will be any the wiser. Our property lies just over a day's drive away. I can assure you that my father will also render you every assistance.'

Thinking that her best course was to comply with his wishes until she could get him settled at the inn he'd mentioned and then she would slip away, she answered meekly. 'Yes, Major. If you insist.'

'That's agreed then, you'll see I'm right. You do not need to say anything when we arrive at the inn, I'll sort everything. I'll request two adjoining rooms and say my bad leg causes me to have sleepless nights.' He cleared his throat. 'In fact, that's very near the truth. I do not intend to compromise your good name, Miss Benham. Please trust me.'

Lottie knew she couldn't really disagree. His plan seemed sensible and for some unknown reason she felt drawn to trust him. He'd not made any improper suggestions or tried to grope her, quite unlike her cousin who'd taken every opportunity to catch her on her own. She would be able to lock her door once she was at the inn and plan what she should do next. Even if his intentions were pure, she wasn't sure she should impose on him or his family any further. She would try and make her own way to Miss Spencer's house.



A short time later they were making their way up High Street. The shops were beginning to put up their shutters and the people they passed were walking purposefully, as if on their way home. No-one took notice of the passing carts, carriages, and the horse carrying two passengers. Lottie kept her head down and was grateful that the light was fading. Surely no-one would recognise her, as she had only once before visited the university town.

The major turned his horse through the archway leading to the stable yard of the Mitre inn. An ostler leaning against the stable door sprang into life and strode towards them, reaching for the reins.

‘You’ll be wanting a room, sir?’ The voice of the innkeeper greeted them from where he stood in the doorway of the inn, an anxious-looking man, his face shiny and cheeks red like a polished apple.

‘A suite if you have one. I’m afraid my wife and I have had a bit of a mishap. Our coach overturned.’ The innkeeper’s face turned solicitous as the major continued smoothly, ‘My man’s taking care of it, but we needed to make speed as my sister-in-law is expecting her first child any time soon and has to have her sister, my darling wife, with her at all costs.’ Lottie jumped as a hand patted her leg. ‘Promised my brother-in-law I’d get her there on time. You know how delicate women are, and at such a trying time? We men must indulge them.’ She saw him give the landlord a conspiratorial wink.

The innkeeper nodded sagely, as if he knew all about indulging the fairer sex. The major turned to Lottie, who was speechless at his audacity. ‘There, my love. I told you I would get you to Oxford by nightfall. We just need to send word to my father to send his coach. He’ll reach us in no time, and well before our own is sorted.’

Lottie’s mouth opened and closed but she was unable to speak. The man was incorrigible, telling such enormous lies... and he’d called her “my love” and “darling wife”. He certainly had a nerve. Before she could think of a suitable reply, he manoeuvred himself off the horse and, still clinging to the saddle, beckoned the innkeeper over.

‘Couldn’t give me a hand, could you? I’ve got a bad leg and the accident seems to have jarred it. I’m finding it difficult to...’ He slumped against the horse. Lottie watched in horror as the major started to slide to the ground.

'Here, Jim, make haste,' called the innkeeper. 'Help the lady dismount then give me a hand getting the gentleman upstairs. Now don't you worry, mistress. Your husband will be fine by and by.'

Lottie stared white-faced as the innkeeper stood by the now-unconscious major. The ostler hurried over and helped her down. She followed as the two men struggled with her companion's inert body, through the hallway, past the open taproom door, and up the wooden stairs to the first floor. Just as they reached the first-floor landing, a female voice bellowed behind her.

'Sam Grover, what's going on here? Who are these people?'

Lottie turned to see a woman at the bottom of the stairs, obviously the innkeeper's wife, arms akimbo and looking decidedly hostile.

'Don't worry, my sweet,' soothed the innkeeper. 'This gentleman and his lady wife have had an accident on the way here. He's just taken bad. I was going to take him into our best suite and call the doctor, if that's all right with you, Mrs Grover?' The innkeeper had changed, becoming diffident, almost servile, in his wife's presence. The stout Mrs Grover hauled herself up the stairs at a surprisingly brisk pace for someone of her girth, as her husband and the ostler continued to clutch the major's lifeless body. They now hovered on the landing, uncertain of where to place him and apparently terrified of Mrs Grover's wrath.

Lottie decided she needed to speak up. 'Ah, Mrs Grover, your husband is kindly assisting my husband. We unfortunately suffered a coach accident and I fear Major Crawford has further damaged his bad leg.'

She knew if she was going to tell lies, they might as well be substantial ones. She would be going to hell in any case. 'We were planning on staying the night here and sending word to my father-in-law for help with the remainder of our journey.' She forced a slight supplicating smile on her face but didn't have to disguise her anxiety and unease; they were both very real.

She passed Mrs Grover's penetrating inspection. That lady had swept her eyes over her person, taking in the untidy but well-made clothes, and apparently concluded that Lottie was who she said and good for payment.

Mrs Grover glared at her husband. 'Mr Grover, what are you standing there gawping for? Open the door and put the gentleman down and allow his wife to care for him.' Then she turned to the ostler, who was staring at her transfixed. 'Jim, soon as Mr Grover's finished with you in there, get yourself over to Dr Jones and tell him he's needed.'

Finally, she returned her gaze to Lottie, who had been amazed to witness such a prime example of powerful womanhood. Why couldn't she command the male sex like Mrs Grover? She could have made short work of her cousin if she had possessed Mrs Grover's mysterious powers. In quite a different tone, Mrs Grover addressed her. 'Well, Mrs Crawford, here is our best suite, I'm sure you'll be comfortable. I'll send Bess up to attend you with some hot water and towels. The doctor shouldn't be long.'

'Th-thank you, I'm sure we'll be most comfortable here,' Lottie managed to

answer.

She entered the room to see that Mr Grover and his helper had placed the major on the impressive four-poster bed, which took up a large portion of the room. The major seemed to be regaining his wits; he was moaning and cursing as his leg was jarred by all the movement.

Lottie felt herself propelled forward by the firm hand of Mrs Grover. 'Go and see to your husband, Mrs Crawford. These men have no idea how to go on, do they, my dear?'

'Err... no indeed. Here I am, my dear Major.' What else could she do but move towards the bed and take the major's hand in a show of wifely solicitude?

'Damn and blast! It hurts like the blazes. Get off me you fools.' The major did not sound at all happy and Mr Grover and the ostler hurriedly backed away from the bed and out of the room, closely followed by Mrs Grover who, before closing the door behind her, sent a sympathetic eye roll to Lottie, as if to say men were such babies.

Lottie turned back to look at the glowering – but now silent – gentleman on the bed. He was inspecting her as if he'd never seen her before.

His lips twitched. 'Who are you, my dear?'

*Oh my goodness, surely he hasn't completely lost his wits and forgotten our arrangement?* She tried to quell her rising panic. 'Don't you remember, Major Crawford? We met earlier today and... and you said you would help me reach my friend's.'

'Oh dear, do forgive me, Miss Benham,' he chuckled, all severity wiped from his face. 'I couldn't resist... your face. Of course I remember you.' He smiled up at her.

*Good grief, he is making jokes.* Her stomach churned. *How could he at a time like this?* She wrenched her hand out of his; she'd forgotten she was still holding on to him. She stood, hands folded across her chest, and glared. He stopped smiling. 'I sometimes think a little levity helps when one is in pain. Sorry,' he said, sounding apologetic. He winced as he shuffled to make himself more comfortable. 'I'm sorry too for passing out like that. The pain was intense when I put my weight on my bad leg. I think I really upset it when I came off Max earlier.'

Her anger deflated, to be replaced by guilt. His fall had been all down to her. 'Don't apologise, Major Crawford. I understand. I'm the cause of all your troubles.'

'Nonsense, I don't think I saw you fighting with the French at Talavera, unless you were heavily disguised, of course?' He quirked a smile at her.

Now he was trying to put her at her ease and she was grateful. Her mouth also twitched up into a smile. 'No, I've never been out the country; in fact I've only been as far as Oxford before, and that only once.' She halted as a knock sounded at the door.

'Enter,' barked the major.

A maid, presumably the promised Bess, stepped in holding a bowl of steaming

water and an armful of towels. She was closely followed by a soberly dressed gentleman carrying a battered leather satchel. He stepped over to the bed and introduced himself as Dr Jones. His face had a careworn expression, but his words and tone were bracing, designed to bolster anxious patients. 'Well, well, what have we here? Been in an accident I hear? I understand it's your leg?'

'That's correct, but my leg problem is not new – last year in fact,' replied the major. 'I took a ball to the thigh, just above the knee. It was improving, left me with some pain and a limp but I could manage. Unfortunately, I suffered a knock earlier today.'

'Yes, Mr Grover said your carriage overturned,' the doctor interrupted.

'Must have been more shaken up than I thought. We needed to reach Oxford for the night, so my wife and I took my horse. Well, when I dismounted the pain was so intense I must have lost consciousness. It's just about bearable now.'

'Let me see.' The doctor peered over at Lottie. 'Mrs Crawford, would you be so kind as to assist me in removing your husband's breeches?'

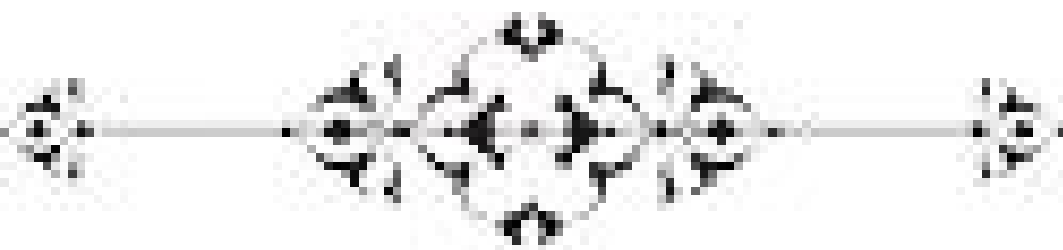
Lottie froze. This was a bad dream that was rapidly turning into a nightmare. How could she help him to undress? She'd barely seen a man without his cravat, never mind his breeches. She'd seen to her father in his final illness, but he'd had his valet to help him disrobe and take care of his more personal needs. She'd only seen him when he was swathed from neck to toe in his nightshirt. To her surprise, Major Crawford came to her rescue. In her opinion he'd been looking rather too pleased when the doctor had made his request of her.

'I'm afraid my wife is quite overset; aren't you, my dear? She had a terrible shock this morning and well... we are only recently married, if you get my drift, sir?'

The doctor smiled at her in a kindly fashion. 'Apologies, madam. I understand. If you would be so obliging as to leave the room and step next door, I will examine your husband.' She scuttled through the door leading to the adjoining parlour, but not before she heard the doctor say, 'I take it this is your honeymoon, then? Not a very auspicious start is it?'

Her heart skipped a beat at the major's reply: 'No, but we have the rest of our lives together to look forward to.'

# Chapter 3



LOTTIE COULDN'T GET OUT of the bedroom fast enough. Her cheeks were burning and her legs were shaking. She sat down at the small dining table and took a few deep breaths to settle her nerves, then assessed her situation. She'd made it to Oxford at least. It was almost dark, and her cousin hopefully still hadn't discovered her absence. But now Major Crawford required her assistance more than she needed his and, because of his kindness, she couldn't just abandon him. Besides, in the dark, where could she go?

Ever practical, she decided that food was required, something to eat and sustain the inner person. She would go downstairs and request that a meal be sent up. Hopefully the formidable landlady was still feeling kindly disposed towards her. Lottie opened the door from the parlour that led to the corridor and headed for the stairs leading down to the main hallway. At the bottom, serving maids and tapmen were bustling about bringing food and ale from the kitchen to the inn's public eating rooms. She paused, uncertain of where to find Mrs Grover. She needn't have worried; that lady's voice was soon heard, issuing instructions and reprimands. Lottie hurried towards the source. In a small back parlour, obviously the command centre of the inn, she found Mrs Grover about to partake of a repast of her own.

Anxious about disturbing the intimidating landlady, Lottie nevertheless braced herself and tapped on the door. Mrs Grover whipped round to face her, a scold for the expected maid about to leave her lips. She adjusted her demeanour on seeing Lottie and bustled forward, a concerned smile on her face.

'My dear lady, whatever are you doing here? You should have sent Bess for me rather than brave our public rooms by yourself. I pride myself on running a respectable establishment, but all the same. Some gentlemen, and I use the term advisedly, forget themselves when they are in drink, so I think you would be better remaining in your rooms until your husband is recovered.'

Lottie nodded in agreement. 'You are indeed correct, Mrs Grover. I came down to request some food to be sent up. I quite forgot to mention it to the maid. It is some hours since we've eaten.'

She was cut off by Mrs Grover's exclamation. 'Of course! Mrs Crawford, what



was I thinking? Men do get irritable when they've had short rations, don't they? I expect Major Crawford is feeling quite understandably out of sorts, not only with his leg but also an empty stomach. But don't let him scold you, my dear, it was entirely my fault and I shall tell him so.'

Lottie was aghast at the thought of Mrs Grover going in to reprimand the major. 'Oh no, he wasn't scolding me – in fact he doesn't know I've come down here. The doctor is still with him.'

Mrs Grover's expression was one of puzzlement. 'But why are you not with him, Mrs Crawford? Surely you need to keep an eye on things, to let the doctor know if he errs?'

Now the thought of Mrs Grover instructing the doctor on how to carry on his own business made Lottie blanch, but the landlady was rather forceful, and Lottie could almost see her carry it off. 'Well, you see... we are only recently married, so I didn't want to intrude too much...'

Understanding dawned on Mrs Grover's face and she patted Lottie's arm. 'Why didn't you say, my dear Mrs Crawford? I see it now, you are newlyweds. No need to blush, my dear lady. But take some advice from me if you will. Start how you mean to go on, that's what I say.' She wagged her finger at Lottie. 'Show the gentleman that you are not to be trampled on. He will respect you for it in the end. I managed my first husband that way, God rest his soul, and I manage Mr Grover the same, and he has no complaints.' Lottie suspected the poor man didn't dare. Mrs Grover continued, 'Now you go back upstairs, and I will have some food sent up shortly.' She glanced at Lottie's skirt, noticing the torn panel. 'I'll send up some needles and thread too, Mrs Crawford. If you don't mind me saying so, it doesn't do to be seen like that. People do make assumptions.'

'Thank you, you are very kind,' Lottie managed to say before turning to escape.



She was halfway up the stairs when a commotion could be heard in the yard outside. Peering out the window on the half landing, she saw a large travelling coach had arrived, followed by several others all in the same painted livery. In the flickering light of the yard's lanterns, a crest could just be discerned on the coach doors, but she was unable to make out the details. Loud voices rose from the hallway below. She moved to peer over the banister. An elegant, well-dressed gentleman was remonstrating with Mr Grover. But not for long. Lottie suppressed

a smile as Mrs Grover launched out of her office and shoved her husband out of the way to take charge. Their voices reached Lottie's ears.

'Your best suite is taken? Then please ask the present incumbent to move to another room, His Grace will cover the cost for any inconvenience.' The man's tone was polite but firm.

'But, sir, you don't understand, Major Crawford is injured,' answered Mrs Grover, equally as firm. 'It may cause further damage to his leg to move him again. His wife is quite distraught. Please tell His Grace that I would be happy for him to use two of our second-best rooms and have exclusive use of our main parlour.'

'Crawford, you say? With a leg injury? But a Mrs Crawford? No, it can't be the same person.' The gentleman sounded puzzled. 'Very well, show me these other rooms. I have to say, His Grace will not be happy. He's had a tiring journey and is not feeling his best.'

Lottie was almost sorry for the gentleman, he sounded so anxious and concerned. A duke was no doubt a demanding employer. But was it possible this gentleman knew her Major Crawford? Good grief, she was already thinking that he belonged to her.

Before she could pull away and return to her room, Mrs Grover caught sight of her as she led the gentleman up the stairs. 'There you are, Mrs Crawford. I'm afraid I've had to explain to Mr Heslop here that our best suite has been taken by you and your husband, and that your poor husband has injured himself so is unable to be moved.'

How she hated being the centre of attention. Lottie turned to see three pairs of eyes staring at her intently. Mrs Grover was smiling, the picture of benevolence, her husband hovered behind her, anxiety written on his face, and Mr Heslop, a pleasant but serious-looking gentleman – she guessed his age to be around thirty – raked her with his piercing blue eyes. He must have noted her anxiety for his face broke into a sympathetic smile.

'I'm sorry to hear about your husband, Mrs Crawford. How serious is his injury?' He sounded genuinely concerned.

'Well, it's one he's had since last year, on the Peninsula, with Viscount Wellington,' answered Lottie. 'But our carriage overturned this morning and I'm afraid it has upset his wound again. I'm sorry, but he can't be moved, you see.' By mentioning Major Crawford's war record, she hoped the gentleman would be more sympathetic to their plight. She didn't want to get on the wrong side of a duke after all. She held on to the banister to steady herself; telling bare-faced lies did not sit well with her.

Mr Heslop's eyes went wide at the mention of the Peninsula, then they narrowed. Did he not believe her story? Some of it was true. 'Would it be possible for me to see your husband – Major Crawford is it? I think we may be acquainted. Though I have to say, if it is he, I don't believe he told me he had plans to marry.'

Lottie's stomach churned. Surely there was more than one Major Crawford on the Peninsula? It would just be too much if her major was the only one. Their subterfuge would be exposed, and her cousin was bound to discover her whereabouts. The scandal of an unmarried young lady staying in the same rooms as a gentleman would be the talk of Oxford by mid-morning.

Mrs Grover's voice added to her misery and shame. 'Oh, Mr Heslop, Major and Mrs Crawford are newlyweds, so their accident is doubly unfortunate, don't you think? But I don't suppose it is your acquaintance, or you surely would have known of his impending nuptials.'


Just then Dr Jones came down the stairs. Seeing Lottie amongst the group standing on the half landing he interrupted with a reassuring smile. 'There you are, Mrs Crawford. Your husband will be fine after a few days' rest. His leg had been healing nicely, but his recent accident has badly jarred it. He'll need to take care for a while. No horse riding for a few weeks.' The doctor's smile turned melancholic. 'Told me he'd fallen at Talavera; very much a near disaster that was. My son was there and wrote me about it. He's still over there. I pray God that monster Bonaparte will soon be vanquished and our boys returned to us before too long.' He sighed before adding, 'Well, I'll say goodnight to you all. Mrs Grover, you know where I am if I'm needed again.'

They moved apart to let him past, a sympathetic smile showing on Mrs Grover's face. Lottie, despite her own immediate concerns, also felt for him. Her cousin Jonah's older brother, Ned, had died on the ill-fated Walcheren expedition the previous year, though from illness, not a battle wound. They had only received news of his death sometime after her father's death. He should have inherited, not Jonah. She wouldn't be in this fix otherwise. She looked up to see Mr Heslop regarding her with a glint in his eye.

He turned to Mrs Grover. 'Show me your rooms, ma'am. I'm sure His Grace will have awoken by now and won't want to be kept waiting, so I'll just check that they are suitable... and I'm sure they will be,' he added swiftly when he saw her face harden. He turned back to Lottie. 'Mrs Crawford, I shall be pleased to call on you and your husband once His Grace is settled. If your husband is indeed my old friend, I will be happy to offer you any assistance. If he is not, well, I will keep my visit to the minimum, but you may still be assured of my assistance.'

Before she could deny him, he bowed and swept up the stairs, closely followed by Mrs Grover. Well, what could she do now? Lottie returned to her room, her mind whirling, but she'd no sooner sat down to gather her thoughts than a tap on the door heralded the maid with a sewing kit.

'Your food will only be a moment, ma'am. Cook's setting a tray for you just now.' The maid bobbed a curtsy and left. Lottie locked and bolted the door. Then, with some trepidation, she tapped on the door to the adjoining bedroom.



Hearing the light knock on the door, relief flooded through Nate; he'd been concerned that Miss Benham might not return. He endeavoured to keep his tone light. 'There you are. I thought you'd run off, you've been such a time. Did you see the doctor before he left? Such rotten luck! No more riding for me for several weeks.' The expression on her face finally registered with him as she hesitated near the door, looking ill at ease and nervous.

'What is it, Miss Benham? You look pale and tired. You should be in this bed, not me.' Her eyes widened at his poor choice of words and he added, 'I'm sorry, my dear. How unthinking of me... I didn't mean— oh dear, I'm not accustomed to dealing with young ladies and their sensibilities, I don't have any sisters, you see.' He flashed her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. 'Come pull up that chair and tell me what has put you out of sorts, apart from our escapades on the road today. I suppose I'd also better get used to calling you Mrs Crawford, hadn't I, or our secret will be out.'

She seemed to find her voice at last. 'I'm rather concerned that our secret will be out no matter what you call me, Major Crawford. I think there may be an acquaintance of yours staying at the inn.' She slumped down in the chair next to the bed and put her head in her hands, the picture of misery. 'It's all going terribly wrong. Why did I think running away from Jonah was a good idea?'

Nate wondered what else had happened to cause her this much upset. He was just beginning to enjoy himself, almost forgetting the torment in his leg on seeing clearly for the first time the pretty, delicate features of her face – her lively eyes and expressive mouth. In fact, despite the nagging pain and the shame of falling from his mount, his spirits had considerably lifted since setting out that morning. But now his companion looked distraught.

Drat it! He wanted to reach over and put his arms round her to comfort her. But he couldn't move, his damned leg had him trapped. And who was this Jonah person? He would throttle the life out of him if he got hold of him for upsetting Miss Benham so. He stretched as far as he dared and stroked her arm. Her head came up and she looked at him through eyes that were brimming with unshed tears. 'Don't cry, Miss Benham. I can handle most things, but I'm afraid I'm horribly lost when it comes to a lady's tears.'

She gave him a weak smile, then, sniffing loudly and wiping her eyes, she answered in complete denial of all the evidence to the contrary: 'I wasn't crying,

you know, I'd just got something in my eye.'

He wasn't fooled for a moment. 'Hmm, I'm sure. Now, who is staying at the inn who you think may know me? I can't think of anyone of my acquaintance who should be here. I did attend Oxford, but no-one with university connections should know of my presence here today.'

'I think I heard his name as Heslop,' she answered. 'He's travelling with a duke; he mentioned 'His Grace' several times. I assume he must be the duke's servant or man of business.' She bit her lip and looked over to him, as if she was willing him to answer that he'd never heard of the man.

He was going to have to disappoint her. 'Heslop. Yes, Francis. Wonder what he's doing here?' He caught her look of sheer panic. 'Now don't go upsetting yourself unnecessarily, Miss Benham. Francis is a good sort, none better in fact. He'll keep our secret.'

His reassuring words appeared not to placate her at all. 'What! You intend to tell him we're not really married? Can't you just pretend for now? When I disappear from your life you can tell him I've died or run off or something.'

He didn't want her running off into the dark Oxford streets. He'd vowed to keep her safe, and that he would do. 'Now, what sort of man would that make me, Miss Benham, if I was a husband whose wife would run off?' He forced a smile. 'No, I've known Francis since I was a boy. Believe me, he can be trusted to keep secrets. Besides, I saw him in London just the other week, there's no way he will believe that I've suddenly become leg shackled.' He coughed, remembering who he was talking to. 'Begging your pardon – married, I mean.'

Her face fell. 'Oh dear. No, I don't suppose he will if you only saw him last week.'

Fortunately, a knock on the door announcing the arrival of their food brought a halt to their discussion. He had forgotten how hungry he was. The smells coming from the trays brought in by the maid were temptingly delicious. Mrs Grover herself accompanied the maid and treated them to a nonstop commentary. He had known a sergeant major much like her.

'Here you are, Major and Mrs Crawford,' Mrs Grover announced. 'I do apologise for the delay. Bess, bring that table over here by the bed so that Mrs Crawford may help the major to some dinner without running about the room. Goodness me, girl, get a move on, the food will be cold. Well, His Grace is now settled in his room, thank goodness. My word, what a to-do. Though he does look a bit peaked. Mr Heslop looks after him though, such a pleasant young man. I thought he was going to make more of a fuss, but he was most condescending and agreeable.'

The table finally placed in a position that Mrs Grover deemed suitable, she chased the harassed maid out, and as she herself left the room she added, 'Now Mrs Crawford, don't forget what I said earlier, will you?' She winked broadly and closed the door behind her.

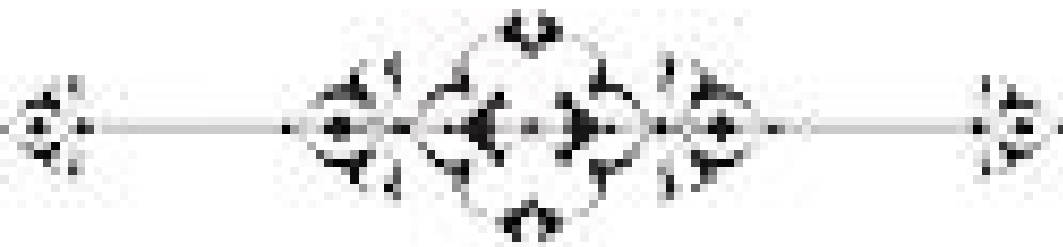
'What was all that about?' asked Nate, observing that Lottie's cheeks were now

a becoming pink.

‘Oh, nothing really. Nothing of importance,’ Lottie answered him.

He guessed it was some female secret, so he didn’t press further.

# Chapter 4



IT WAS FUNNY HOW something mundane, such as buttering bread or sipping a spoonful of soup, settled one's nerves... and pleasant company, thought Lottie. She glanced across at Major Crawford, who was telling her about his family estate near Hampton in Arden and how glad his father would be to have him home permanently after his exploits in Spain. She was grateful that he was taking the burden of conversation on himself; she didn't really feel up to confiding all her problems just yet. She allowed his warm, mellifluous tones to wash over her.

'I'm the only son, you see, shouldn't really have bought a commission, being the only heir.' He sighed. 'But Father didn't want to stop me, though I knew he was worried. He said I needed some adventure before I settled down and would always regret it if I didn't go. I thought it was very brave of him to let me.' He leaned back against the pillows and folded his arms behind his head. 'You'll like him when you meet him, I'm sure. I'll get a message off to him shortly. We'll soon be sorted, and you'll be safe, Miss Benham.'

Lottie was pleased for the major. He obviously had a deep love for his father, and it seemed his father felt the same for him. If only her father still lived, she wouldn't be in this predicament. But then she would never have made Major Crawford's acquaintance, and that would have been a pity. She watched him as he sat propped up on the bed. His eyes were an arresting green, and his whole face seemed to smile when his mouth did. She recalled how he'd looked earlier that day, seated on the pathway. He'd cocked his head to one side as he lounged on the ground, looking for all the world as if he'd chosen to sit there and had not been unceremoniously dumped by his horse. She'd never met anyone like him before. He was exciting, attractive with his dark brooding looks, yet she felt safe with him and believed the words he spoke so assuredly. She let her gaze wander over to the fireplace, where the warm coals were glowing orange.

'What are you thinking about, Mrs Crawford?' Her eyes shot towards him when he added, 'Though I do think I should start to call you by your first name – the observant Mrs Grover will surely notice if I continue to call you Mrs Crawford all the time, and us supposed to be newlyweds too. My friends call me Nate. What is your first name?'

Lottie took a breath and made a decision. 'It's Lottie, actually. My father used to call me Lottie. Only Cousin Jonah calls me Charlotte.'

Surprise registered in his eyes, as if he hadn't expected her to trust him with something so personal. 'I take it that your father is no longer with you... Lottie?'

'That's right,' she answered, 'he passed away some twelve months ago. My cousin Ned was his heir. He was Jonah's older brother. Ned was nice, not like Jonah at all. He was in the army too, he went to Walcheren in July of last year and was dead by August. Walcheren sickness, we were told. So many young men died there, and many still suffering I hear.' She paused, thinking how different things would have been. If only. But life was full of "if onlys". One had to manage with what one had. And she'd been left with Jonah. She suppressed a shiver.

Nate spoke. 'Many young men are still dying unnecessarily, I'm afraid. At Talavera...' He cleared his throat. 'Well, you don't want to hear about that. But tell me about this Jonah. Why has he caused you to flee?'


She saw nothing but kindness and interest in his eyes. She might as well tell him, what more harm could it do? 'Jonah, as I said, is not at all like Ned. He is only interested in money. He spends all his time in London, frequenting gaming halls and worse. Ned told me that when he joined up Jonah had called him a fool. Said there were easier ways to make a living from this war between us and France. Ways where you didn't have to risk your life.'

Lottie continued, oblivious to Nate's reaction to her words – his mouth had thinned into a hard line and his hands clenched into fists on the bed. 'Well, the house and estate were entailed, so they went to Ned. He was abroad at the time and never returned. Now it all belongs to Jonah. But my father willed his money and investments to me. They are to be administered by his solicitor until I am twenty-five – next year, in fact. Then I will have complete control of them. That is, unless I marry first, in which case my husband will have control of them immediately.'

'Ah, yes. I see. So your cousin wishes you to marry him?'

'It's even worse than that,' her voice faltered. 'He doesn't want a wife at all, just the money. I heard him discussing matters the night before last with his friend. He plans to get me committed to an asylum after we marry, or if that proves too complicated, he apparently knows of an establishment that takes women, no questions asked. I will just... disappear.' Her voice was now almost a whisper. 'So you see, I had no option but to run.' She stopped, her head bowed, overcome with emotion at saying these things out loud, sharing them with another. When they'd been unspoken, they seemed almost unreal. Speaking them made them... real. Terrifying.





Nate had been listening to her story with increasing disgust and incredulity. Now his blood ran cold. How could anyone consider doing such a thing... and to this innocent girl? His resolve to help her strengthened. Good Lord, he'd be as bad as her cousin if he did nothing. His father would help too, he was sure.

'Where were you planning on running to when we met? You mentioned a friend – a mature lady of impeccable morals, if I remember rightly?'

'That's right, Miss Spencer,' she answered. 'She isn't that elderly really. She was my governess for several years, then she stayed on as a companion when my mother passed away. She left me four years ago to look after her ailing sister, but we still correspond. She lives in Warwickshire. The good thing is, Jonah doesn't know about her. So, I thought I'd hide out there until my birthday. He will be able to do nothing then. Will he?'

Nate wasn't convinced. Her cousin could get up to all sorts of mischief in her absence. Have her declared insane for running off, that sort of thing. He needed to think. He hadn't been part of the Beau's private staff for nothing – working out strategy had been his forte. He just needed some time.

A knock came at the door, and Lottie's face became panic-stricken. Nate leaned over and grabbed her hand. 'Lottie, please don't worry. It's probably my friend Francis. He said he'd call, didn't he?'

She nodded. Reassured that she would not bolt, Nate called out: 'Enter.'

The door opened and there indeed stood Francis Heslop, looking very elegant, Nate had to admit. A broad grin spread over Heslop's face as his eyes locked on Nate's. He closed the door behind him, the candlelight catching his blond hair, making him seem almost angelic as he strode over to where Nate lay sprawled on the bed.

'Nate, you old devil! What are you up to? Who is this lovely young lady? The landlady thinks you are married.'

'Not another word, Francis. This is serious.' Nate's barked words wiped the smile from his friend's face and that gentleman had the grace to blush. Heslop swept a hand through his hair.

'I'm sorry, Nate. I do apologise, Mrs... Crawford. I thought...'

'I know what you thought, Francis, and you were wrong,' cut in Nate. 'Now take a seat and I will explain, though first please let me introduce you. Miss Benham, this gentleman is one of my oldest friends – we grew up together in fact

– Mr Francis Heslop. Francis, this is Miss Lottie Benham, a young lady in dire need of help and protection and your utmost discretion.’ He glared at Heslop. ‘I can’t stress that enough, Francis.’

Lottie stood and curtsied before seating herself again and Francis made her an elegant bow. Nate caught her hand again and gave it a brief squeeze. He did not release it.

Francis, who’d seemed stunned by Nate’s disclosures, at last found his voice. ‘I understand, Nate. If I understand nothing else, I know how to be discreet.’ Nate nodded an acknowledgement as Francis continued. ‘What do you require of me, Nate? You know I will be happy to help both you and Miss Benham.’

Nate was not quite sure how much to disclose to his friend. In the army the rule had been to give only as much information as was needed to carry out a task. He decided to stick to the rule. ‘Well, as I was saying, Miss Benham requires my help. She needs to, shall we say, disappear for – how many months, Miss Benham?’

He watched as Lottie considered his question. ‘Ten months at least. My birthday is not until February next year.’

‘Quite a long period to stay invisible, I think. How do you plan on doing that?’ queried Francis. By the incredulous look on his face, Nate thought his friend didn’t think it possible.


‘Miss Benham had a plan, but I’m certain we can improve on it. Let me think.’ Nate’s brain was whirring; he needed to come up with something and fast. Her cousin was bound to think Oxford would be the first obvious place she would have run to. They needed to depart, and soon. But how, with his damned leg? He needed to get word to his father. ‘Would it be possible for you to send a message to my father, Francis? Ask him to meet me here and to bring the travelling coach.’

‘I’ll go one better than that, Nate. I assume you intend to go to your estate at some point?’

Nate nodded, wondering what Francis had in mind. His friend did not elucidate, merely saying, ‘Leave it with me. Now, did the doctor say you couldn’t be moved at all?’

‘No, he advised rest certainly, but only forbade me to ride for a couple of weeks.’

‘Good,’ was the terse reply. ‘I’ll be back in a few moments. Don’t move.’ With that, Francis leapt up, bowed again to Lottie, and left the room, pulling the door shut behind him. Lottie, eyes wide, gaped at Nate. Nate smiled to reassure her. He had no idea what his friend had in mind.



In the intervening twenty or so minutes before Francis returned, the maid came with more candles and coal for the fire. The room was quite cosy, and Lottie's eyelids were drooping. Nate too was exhausted; all the events of the day had taken their toll. He was dozing when he spotted Lottie gently removing one of the pillows off the bed.

'Where do you think you are going with that?' he demanded.

She looked startled. 'Why... I thought I'd start to make up a bed on the sofa next door. It looks quite comfortable.'

'Nonsense. You're staying in this room with me, where I can keep an eye on you.'

'I beg your pardon!' came her outraged reply.

Before she could continue, he interrupted her. 'Now don't get all prim and proper; that's not what I meant at all. I have no wish to compromise you, I just want to keep you safe. That parlour has an outer door, does it not? Well, we cannot risk someone coming in that way, whether it's your cousin or not. Believe me, I've stayed at inns before and seen what goes on when men have had a few drinks. They barge into the wrong rooms and... well, if they see you on your own... I can hardly protect you if I'm in the other room, can I?'

He watched as her rigid stance relaxed. Had he convinced her his motives were honourable? Not that he wouldn't mind sharing more than a room with the lovely Miss Benham... Lottie. She looked very desirable standing there, her hair coming loose and her delectable cheeks flushed with emotion.

'Oh. I see what you mean.' She cast determined eyes over the room. 'I shall sleep on the floor then.'

'Do have a bit of sense, Lottie. There is a truckle bed under this one. Francis will help pull it out when he returns. He will then help me to get on that and you may have this bed.' Nate immediately felt guilty. Was he being too brusque? He was accustomed to having his every instruction obeyed without question, and now he was reprimanding an innocent young woman. Good grief, what a martinet he was! He must remember he was no longer in the army, and Lottie was not a hapless private soldier who needed pulling into shape. Though he would like to pull her into his arms and kiss her thoroughly. If only his leg would work. But likely she would slap his face and run screaming from the room. And he had vowed to be an honourable man. Through his thoughts he heard her

spoke; she sounded tired, chastened, What a monster he was to reprimand her.

‘Oh, I see what you mean. But are you sure you need to move? What about your leg? I am happy to have the truckle bed.’

He was just about to respond when a knock sounded on the door and in-bowled Francis. Nate thought his friend was looking pleased with himself; his blue eyes held a twinkle and he was grinning. ‘It’s all sorted,’ Francis announced. ‘Don’t worry about anything. His Grace is delighted to help, he does enjoy a bit of subterfuge now and again.’

‘What do you mean? What’s sorted?’ asked Nate.

‘You will take His Grace’s travelling coach early in the morning, before first light. It will take you to Willow End, which was your intended destination I think?’

Nate nodded, his mouth open but no sound coming out, astonished that the Duke of Wheatley was involving himself in this adventure. He didn’t know the man. True, he’d visited his London house once, but he’d never actually been in the Duke’s presence. He decided to puzzle it out later.

Francis was speaking. ‘His Grace and I will remain here for a couple of days. If we hear of anyone making enquiries, we’ll point them in the wrong direction... say, Bristol? Oh, and don’t worry about your horse, one of Wheatley’s grooms will bring it to Willow End when we depart Oxford.’

Nate nodded again; he was still finding it difficult to speak. In the meantime, Francis was outlining more details, his voice tinged with excitement. ‘We’ll say that Wheatley has left behind some important items in London, hence sending his coach back to fetch them, so we’ll have misdirection in two ways. What do you think? It should work, shouldn’t it?’ He paused for their response, a broad smile on his face.

Nate looked over at Lottie, who was biting her lip and looking at him uncertainly, as if waiting for his verdict. Her trust in his judgement shook him. She, at least, did not consider him a failure.

He managed to speak at last. ‘Thank Wheatley most sincerely please, Francis. I can see that his plan might very well work and buy Miss Benham the time she needs to locate her friend and secrete herself away. I’ve every reason to believe that the person from whom she is running is quite a desperate and ruthless fellow, who will stop at nothing to get his own way. I’ll take her first to the family estate and then we’ll discuss how to proceed from there.’

He looked at Lottie, who had moved near the door to the parlour, clutching the pillow she had taken from the bed in front of her like a shield. She reminded him of a nervous soldier who needed encouragement before the forthcoming battle. He told himself again that she was no raw recruit but a gently born young lady who needed to be coaxed not bullied.

‘There, Miss Benham, what do you say? The Duke’s plan, as far as I can tell, does have its merits, and I can think of no better options.’

Francis added his encouragement. ‘If you are concerned about the propriety of

travelling on your own with Major Crawford, Miss Benham, please be assured, I will vouch for him. We've known each other since boyhood. He is a gentleman, despite his rough edges and his tendency to bark at people as if they are under his command.' He sent a grin towards Nate then added, 'And you can always threaten to twist his bad leg, that will stop him in his tracks.'

Lottie gave a hesitant smile. 'Yes, I think what you propose is the only way forward. Thank you. I don't see how I can go on by myself. I seem to have made a bit of a mull of it all.'

Nate's reply was brisk. 'Nonsense. Fate brought us together, Miss Benham. I might have come off my horse at any moment, it was just fortuitous that you were around to care for me. Just think, I could be lying there still, cold and inert and no-one the wiser. It could have been days before anyone came across me.' He sighed theatrically. Francis sniggered, and Lottie gave Nate a wry look, as if she knew he was trying to cheer her up.

'That's settled then,' said Nate. 'Francis, could you lend a hand and get the truckle bed out for me and then help me into it? Miss Benham will be taking this bed. I don't want her sleeping in the parlour on her own. This is a respectable inn, but, well... you know what I mean?'

'Of course. Anyone could wander in and try the doors. Though Wheatley has got a couple of his men posted round about in any case. He was quite alarmed on Miss Benham's behalf and thought we should take precautions. Here we go.' Francis bent down and tugged at the truckle bed.

Some agonising moments later, now on the truckle bed near the door, Nate feigned sleep. In his own way, he was trying to reassure Lottie, who he knew must be feeling nervous with him in the same room, that he meant her no harm. God, how his leg ached. The doctor had proffered laudanum, but he'd refused. He'd seen what happened to wounded colleagues who'd become reliant on the stuff. He listened as Lottie's breathing became more even; she, at least, was sleeping.

He considered the lovely, lively girl he'd met just that day. Poor lass, she must be exhausted from the emotional as well as the physical strain she'd had to endure. She'd said she'd only visited Oxford once; her father must have kept her fairly secluded. She was now having to cope with a villain of a cousin and a trek round the country with a man she didn't know. He wouldn't want a sister of his, if he had one, to deal with that.

It also seemed there was no other male member of her family to take care of her. She would have been sure to mention it if there had, wouldn't she? In that case, he concluded, it was up to him to step forward. It was his mission, the reason he'd been spared. He must not fail. He'd be her knight in shining armour. He smiled into the darkness. How ridiculous, he was no-one's hero. Why, he'd managed to get himself shot in what he'd considered the first major battle of the Peninsular Campaign. He dismissed his achievements at Vimeiro and Douro.

Now he was slinking back home to his estate, while friends and colleagues

were either lying dead in Portuguese and Spanish soil or continuing the fight against the Corsican. No, he had still to prove himself. He would sort matters out for Miss Lottie Benham... or die trying.

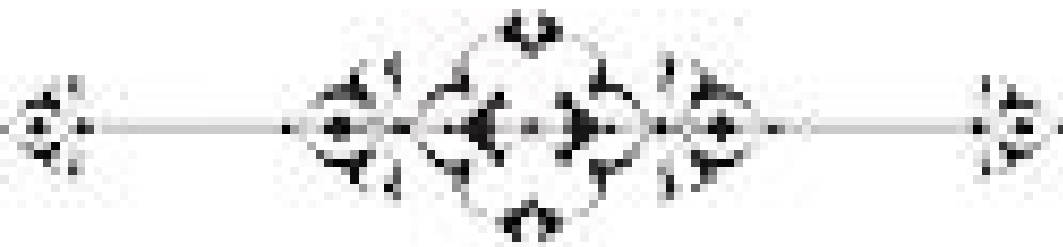
Lottie lay in the four-poster wondering what was going to happen to her in the next few days. When she'd set out at midday, she hadn't in her wildest imaginings envisaged anything like what had actually occurred.

She was grateful for all the help the major – or Nate as he'd insisted she call him – and the duke proposed to offer her, of course she was, but... to be in a closed carriage with a gentleman. That wasn't what she'd intended when she set out. But then she also hadn't intended to be posing as someone's wife and sharing a room, for goodness' sake. Travelling to Harriet Spencer's on the stagecoach had seemed slightly risky, but this? She shuddered under the bedclothes.

She listened as the major rustled and groaned, settling himself in his undersized bed. Fate had been on her side when she was thrown into his path. He was a little abrupt at times, but she put that down to the fact that he wasn't accustomed to dealing with genteel young ladies. Though she was equally certain he had experience of the not-so-genteel sort. He was also accustomed to being in command, though she noticed that he did ask for her opinion. More importantly, he was in pain, and she knew from her experience with her father that constant pain tended to make one irritable.

Perhaps things would work out after all, with the major to help her hide from Jonah until she came into her money. With these disordered thoughts going round her head, she finally fell asleep.

# Chapter 5



‘MRS CRAWFORD, MRS CRAWFORD, your husband sent me to awaken you.’

‘You’re mistaken, I’m not...’ Lottie jolted upright and stopped herself from blurting out that she wasn’t Mrs Crawford. It seemed only minutes since she’d dropped off to sleep, but the evidence told her she’d slept for far longer. The truckle bed had been tidied away, and there was no sign of the major. His bag and belongings had all disappeared.

The maid remained at the side of the bed, a smile on her face. ‘Your husband is downstairs, ma’am. He wishes you to join him there as soon as you are ready. I’ve brought hot water. Would you like me to do your hair?’

‘Oh, no thank you. I’ll manage. I’ll be along shortly.’

The maid persisted. ‘Would you like me to mend your skirt then, Mrs Crawford? I notice that it still requires fixing. It won’t take me but a moment while you do your ablutions.’ She gestured to where Lottie’s skirt lay neatly folded over the back of the chair next to the bed. The maid was obviously well trained. Mrs Grover ran an efficient establishment.

‘That’s very considerate of you, Bess. Thank you, I would appreciate it. I’m afraid I didn’t have time to do it myself last night.’

The maid giggled and nodded. ‘Of course, ma’am, I understand.’

*Good Lord, she thinks I’ve been “busy” with my husband.* Lottie didn’t know where to look. Her face was burning with embarrassment. She hastened out of the bed to the screen where the washstand was placed. Perhaps washing her face would wipe away her blushes.

A short time later, feeling somewhat more composed with her hair tidy and skirt mended, she entered the inn’s front parlour. It was still quite dark, and the room was illuminated by several candle stands and the flickering light of the fire. The two gentlemen who were already there stopped their conversation and turned to look at her. She recognised Francis Heslop, the other she did not know, and there was no sign of the major. Her stomach flipped. Surely he hadn’t abandoned her?

Mr Heslop strode over to her and took her arm, an encouraging smile on his face. ‘Don’t be alarmed, Miss Benham. Nate is already in the carriage. We had a

bit of a problem getting him down the stairs and his leg is quite painful. He asked us to place him there and said he would make himself comfortable until you are ready to join him.'

She let out her breath; she hadn't been abandoned. Mr Heslop guided her towards the other gentleman. 'Let me introduce you. Your Grace, this is Miss Lottie Benham.'

The man who had been standing near the fireplace, his arm negligently draped across the mantelpiece, now sauntered towards her and offered his hand. It was an elegant hand with long tapering fingers ending in manicured nails, the skin soft and well cared for. A large gold signet ring inscribed with intertwined letters adorned one of his fingers. Tall and imposing, this gentleman was dressed all in black, relieved only by the whiteness of his neckcloth and the silver threads in the extravagant embroidery of his waistcoat.

'Miss Lottie Benham, this is His Grace the Duke of Wheatley,' said Francis.

Lottie gulped. She'd never met a duke before. However, she had the presence of mind to make a deep curtsy and take the proffered hand. His hand was cool to her touch, his grip conveyed strength, and he steadied her as she stood up. She saw a face of pleasing proportions, deep-set grey eyes and hollow cheeks emphasised his jutting cheekbones. There was a hint of arrogance around the mouth, despite his smile. She guessed he was in his middle forties. His dark hair, streaked with silver, was swept back off his forehead. For an older man he was attractive, but not as attractive to her mind as Major Crawford.

She finally managed to speak. 'I'm honoured to make your acquaintance, Your Grace.'

'I am very pleased to make yours, Miss Benham,' drawled the duke. 'I understand that you are experiencing a few difficulties at the moment, or so my friend Mr Heslop informs me.' He cast a warm smile over at Francis, then turned again to regard her, his question unspoken but it was there in his eyes. Suppressing her reluctance, she supposed that as the duke had been generous to lend his assistance, he was entitled to all the unsavoury details. She commenced relating all that she had disclosed to Major Crawford.

While she spoke, the duke returned to the fireplace, his back towards her and his arms resting along the mantelpiece, his fingers drumming a faint tattoo. She wondered if in fact he was listening, but this notion was instantly dispelled when he shot out a question. 'What is your cousin's full name, this Jonah fellow? I hope you're taking notes, Francis.'

'Yes Henry, Your Grace, I mean.' Heslop sent her a quick, furtive glance, then moved to sit at the small side table on which were placed sheets of paper, ink, and a quill. He started to write.

'Jonah Aloysius Benham, Your Grace,' Lottie replied. 'He's the younger son of my late uncle. His older brother, Ned... Edward I should say, died at Walcheren. Jonah wasn't meant to inherit, you see. The house and estate being entailed went first to Ned, who was my father's heir. But on Ned's death it passed to Jonah, as



Ned was unmarried and had no heir. But Jonah is not satisfied with his inheritance. He wants mine too.' She paused for a moment, noting only the slightest stiffening of the duke's shoulders at the mention of her cousin's full name.

The duke continued to slowly drum his fingers. 'So, this Ned... he was on Major-General Chatham's staff, is that right?'

'That's correct, Your Grace. Ned was an aide-de-camp for Lord Chatham,' Lottie replied, puzzled that this member of the high aristocracy should be familiar with the workings of a military expedition.

'A pity that his younger brother does not have the same exemplary qualities.' The duke spun round to face her, his face grave. 'Right. Miss Benham, leave matters to me. I think further inquiries are called for. I'm attached to the War Office, though due to my intermittent poor health I've not been so active of late.' He gestured with elegant fingers over to Heslop. 'Never mind, Francis will do all that is necessary. We'll aid you to avoid your cousin until you come into your inheritance.' In silky tones he added, 'Of course, if we find a way of stopping him in his tracks before then, that will be even better, won't it?'

She stared at the now enigmatically smiling duke, completely at a loss as to his meaning. Perhaps such a powerful man did know of ways to thwart her cousin, and she wouldn't need to hide. Before she could formulate a reply, he rapped out his commands.

'Now, Miss Benham, please join Major Crawford. Francis will escort you to the coach. I am reliably informed that the major is an honourable man – a man of integrity. Not many of them about. You may safely entrust yourself to his care. Francis has vouched for him, and I place a high value on his opinions. Major Crawford has stood as a good and loyal friend to Francis when others have not, so anyone who is a friend to Francis is my friend also.' The duke had walked over to place his hand on Francis' shoulder as he finished with his papers and wiped the nib of his pen. Turning back to look at her, the duke added, 'Besides, he will have me to answer to if any harm befalls you.'

Francis coughed and the hard glint in the duke's eyes disappeared. 'One final matter – if you require my further help, please send word, to either myself or Francis. I am at your disposal.'

'Th-thank you, Your Grace,' she stuttered. 'I'm overwhelmed by your kindness.' She curtsied again, which he acknowledged with a cursory nod. She followed Francis out of the parlour, feeling very much like a mouse who had escaped a large predatory cat. Wheatley had all the feline grace of a cat, but her instincts told her he was far more dangerous.

She stepped outside into the darkness of the inn's yard where a carriage stood. Four lively matched black horses were being harnessed, and a footman stationed at the carriage door turned to lower the steps for her to enter. Francis' hand stayed her as she was about to move forward.

'Recall what I said to you last night, Miss Benham. You can trust my friend

Nate Crawford to look after you. God speed, and do remember, there is help if you need it.'

'Thank you, Mr Heslop, I won't forget your kindness and that of His Grace. I am much in your debt.' She was quite overset, everyone was being so kind.



Major Crawford was sprawled across the length of the seat. His hands were folded behind his head and he looked as if he was sleeping, an erroneous assumption on her part, as she soon discovered when she clambered inside.

'Thought you'd never wake up, Miss Benham, but I see you've made it at last.' He opened one eye and grinned at her. 'I was always envious of those who could sleep so easily and deeply. Even after a day's march, when I was glad of my bed, it still took me an age to nod off, and then I would awake at the slightest noise. But you, why you slept through my noisy clambering around, getting clumsily dressed, and loud clattering down the stairs. I salute you, Miss Benham.' He tipped an imaginary hat.

She laughed, despite her embarrassment. 'Yes, I think I was exhausted. Yesterday was quite an unusually unsettling and long day for me.' She thought it uncanny how he managed to stop her from becoming a watering pot. Almost as if he could read her thoughts. Hopefully he couldn't. Now that would be embarrassing.

'Well, you're here now. Open that hamper and we'll break our fast. Francis persuaded Mrs Grover that Wheatley required a lunch to be sent with his coach, so I expect she has enclosed a veritable feast.' There was a twinkle in his eyes as he grinned over at her. It made him seem more of a boy than a soldier.

The coach pulled out of the yard and gathered momentum as it sped up the high street. Only a few tradesmen and carriers had started for the day, so traffic was very light. The carriage, as befitted one belonging to a duke, was very well sprung. The cobbles beneath the wheels were hardly felt by the two occupants.

After they had eaten, and the remnants of their repast had been cleared away, Nate broke the silence. 'I've been thinking, Lottie.' Her heart jolted at his use of her first name; perhaps she would get accustomed to it in time. 'I think before we head off for my father's estate, we should visit this friend of yours. I will assess how safe I think her accommodation is and perhaps you may wish to stay with her if I judge that your cousin will not find you, and if she is happy for you to

stay.'

Lottie's stomach lurched. She hadn't considered that Harriet Spencer might refuse her or indeed might not be able to offer her accommodation. Harriet's last letter had mentioned that her sister was making a good recovery and that the two of them were making a place for themselves in the small village of Knowle.

Nate continued to outline his plans, unaware of her growing doubts. 'The alternative is that she may accompany us to my home. She could chaperone you. I can certainly protect you there much more easily. What do you think?'

She was taken aback at his offer. She didn't want to be a burden to anyone, least of all to someone she'd just met. It was lowering enough to ask Harriet for help, even though that kind lady had often pressed her to visit, renewing her offer when Lottie's father had died.

'That's very kind of you, but I'm not sure. I do not wish to impose. I feel I'm imposing on my friend and I've known her for years. How can I possibly impose on you when we only met yesterday?'

'Don't be a ninnyhammer. You need help and I'm offering it to you. In fact, Wheatley was most insistent that I continue to care for you. It seems he is taking an interest in your situation.' He shrugged as if to say she had no option. 'So you see, you would be going against the express instructions of the Duke of Wheatley if you refuse me.'

She wondered at his smug expression, then the import of his words hit home. It was true the duke had been adamant that she should trust Major Crawford, but she hadn't known he intended for her to actually stay at Nate's estate. That put a different complexion on things. What had she got herself into?

She wasn't accustomed to being assertive. She'd always done as her father bid her. She'd never had the strength to stand up to him and so had remained all her twenty-four years in their small village, not daring to go against his wishes. Harriet had encouraged her to continue to try and change her father's mind, but when she left, all Lottie's determination had failed her. Leaving the house the previous day had been the bravest thing she'd ever done... or was it the most foolhardy? Could she continue as she'd started?

She tipped her chin up and looked at Nate. 'Well, I don't want to cross the duke, do I? And I suppose I should see what my friend Harriet wishes to do before I decide.'

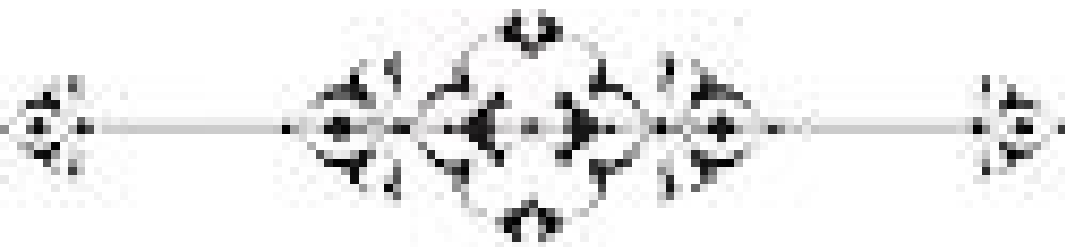
He immediately took her equivocation as consent. 'That's settled then. Now where in Warwickshire does your friend live?'

'She lives in Knowle, Major Crawford, Nate, I mean. Is it far out of our way?'

He grinned. 'Splendid. What a stroke of luck, it's only about three miles from Hampton in Arden. It won't take us out of our way at all.'

Lottie crossed her fingers and hoped that they would find her friend at home and, more to the point, that she would be willing to help her.

# Chapter 6



THE REGULAR JOLTING OF the coach and the effects of a substantial breakfast lulled Nate into a slumber. He closed his eyes and within minutes he was gently snoring. Fascinated, Lottie watched him from her seat opposite. Knowing he was asleep made her confident enough to examine him, her eyes lingering on his body stretched elegantly across the length of the seat. His was a fine figure, the muscles in his legs evident beneath the snug fit of his breeches.

Even when asleep, he exuded strength. She imagined how he would have looked in his uniform. When Ned had become a soldier, she'd taken pride in keeping herself informed about the army and its regiments, so she knew that Light Dragoons wore blue jackets. She sighed to herself. Nate must have looked magnificent astride his horse, charging into battle. Poor man, now he was wounded and stuck with her.

She shifted in her seat, her thoughts making her uncomfortable. What was she going to do? The very first time she'd done something exceptional, and look at what a pickle she was in. But staying at home hadn't been an option after she'd overheard her cousin's sickening plans. How could anyone be so evil? She'd never believed all of Ned's stories about his malicious younger brother, assuming that, like many older siblings with annoying younger brothers, he was perhaps exaggerating. How wrong she'd been.



Barely a week had passed since Jonah arrived with his crony Basil Montgomery at Burwell House. He had immediately made himself at home. He'd ordered the

of course, he was well within his rights, the house and estate now belonged to him. But it seemed that was not enough. Once he'd realised that the estate didn't generate much income and that most of the tenants were pensioners of the previous incumbent, his dismissive treatment of her had changed. His eyes held a calculating look whenever he regarded her. Catching her alone one morning, he'd grabbed her round the waist, forcing her to fend him off with a sharp stab of a hairpin to the back of his hand. She should have realised.

Her father had left her a substantial amount of money and all his shares. In fact, she'd been amazed to learn just how wealthy an heiress she was, when the will was read. All the time spent in his study, her father had been perusing the markets and investing his money in manufacturing and mining and had told her nothing.

It had been by pure chance that she'd overheard Jonah's plans. Passing the half-open library door on her way to give the housekeeper instructions, she heard Basil Montgomery cackling. 'So, Jonah, you have a plan? Do tell.' Curious, she lingered in the hallway, wondering what plan Basil was referring to. Something to do with the estate, no doubt. Jonah had done nothing but complain since he'd gone over the account books.

'Yessshh, I'm quite proud of it, even if I do ssshay so myself,' Jonah's voice slurred. 'Once I've married that little mouse, I can rid myself of her. Might get a doctor to declare her insane, get her committed.' Now, unable to move even if she wanted to, she was riveted to the spot. 'Mind, that'll cost me, won't it? Have to pay for her keep at the asylum. Don't want that.' Still frozen in place, she couldn't actually believe what she was hearing.

'I've got it.' What sounded like a fist thudded on the table, breaking Lottie's trance-like state. She crept closer to the door, despite her growing dread. She needed to hear all of Jonah's plan. 'Mrs Newbody... will write to her in the morning, sssshe's bound to agree. Now there's a woman... got a man's head for business, fingers in lots of pies. Waiting to hear from her in any case.' Jonah chuckled. 'Let me have the use of two of her girls last time I visited and no charge. Generous woman... like her.' There was a hiccough, followed by a loud belch.

'What of her? Don't understand, old man.'

Another belch. 'She has a p-p-place in St James's... caters to gents with plenty of brass. Some of them with very p'culiar and p'ticular tastes, if you know what I mean.' A snigger sent chills up her spine. 'Always needs fresh girls, she does. She'll take Charlotte, yes... no questions asked. And I'll get something in the bargain. Yesssh... that's what I'll do.' More hiccoughs. 'Passssh the d'canter, there's a good chap. At least m'dear departed uncle kept a decent cellar.' Jonah's drunken guffaws gave way to snorts before subsiding into silence.

Feeling sick, Lottie crept back upstairs as fast as she dared. Once she'd got her nerves under some sort of control, she'd devised her escape plan. She'd hurriedly

destroyed all but one of the letters from Harriet, burning them in the grate. The remaining one she placed in her reticule; it contained her friend's address. She'd barely slept that night, but managed to present what she hoped was a normal demeanour the following morning. As usual, her cousin and his friend had risen late, still suffering the effects of their drinking of the previous evening. She'd been left alone. The two men went for a restorative ride, and on their return settled in the dining room for their midday meal, followed by their customary card games and drinking. Pastimes that generally lasted until the dinner bell. Thank goodness they were predictable.

And now here she was, in a coach with a stranger who had promised to help her. Oh, how she hoped he could. She settled into the seat and rested her head against the squabs.



Nate woke with a start. Instinctively he moved his legs and was immediately hit with pain. He stifled his curse when he saw Lottie, asleep on the opposite seat. Damn, he felt helpless. How could he protect her when he could barely walk? He was a failure. He'd messed up in Spain, managing to get himself wounded. He didn't deserve to return to a peaceful life when so many of his comrades were still out there fighting, or dead. Sure, he'd been mentioned in dispatches, told he was brave – some even called him a hero. But he knew the truth. He'd been terrified, uncertain, leading his men forward, many to their deaths, and he'd been one of the few to survive. He didn't deserve it. And now he'd promised to ensure her safety.

His mind was going round in circles, on a downward spiral of the low feelings he'd suffered when travelling home on the ship from the Peninsula. It was only with the help of his comrade Archie, who'd spent days and nights listening to him, talking to him, coaxing him, that he'd refrained from tossing himself overboard.

Poor Archie, he had it much worse, losing his arm. Nate surveyed his leg; it was throbbing like blazes, but at least it was still there. Holding on to that thought, he determined not to succumb to his morbid mood. The doctor said it only required sufficient rest, that it was healing nicely, and his recent fall was just a temporary setback. *Right, just a temporary setback.*

He pulled himself upright, his legs still stretched across the seat, and turned to

observe his companion. Even though asleep, she was sat decorously, feet tucked in and her head resting against the padded side of the carriage, the effect only marred by her bonnet being askew. The knot of the ribbons, which should have been under her chin, was now against her cheek, and several chestnut locks escaped the bonnet's confines. He chuckled. She resembled an inebriated angel – that is, if angels did indeed get inebriated, Nate wasn't sure.

Her features were delicate, with a small retroussé nose and high cheekbones. Her chin was gently curved, but with a determined aspect. The colour of her eyes... well, he couldn't be sure. Sometimes he would swear they were grey, at other times he was sure they were blue. They were closed now though. Whatever colour they were, when she turned them on him, he wanted to drown in them. As for her hair, he imagined it as quite straight and thick when not tied in the simple chignon she seemed to favour. Watching her, asleep and vulnerable, he inwardly repeated his vow to take care of her.



It was shortly after noon when the carriage finally arrived in Knowle. Lottie, bursting with curiosity, peered out the window to see timber-framed houses surrounding a charming village square. Trees just coming into full leaf swayed in the light breeze, and a dog could be heard barking in the distance.

Nate smiled at her eagerness. What must it be like to travel for the first time? To see new places? He remembered his own pleasure and curiosity at setting foot in Portugal. How that had rapidly changed to boredom and a longing for the more temperate climate of England. Camping under the stars was all very well in the heat of summer, but in the depths of winter, feeling ill and not knowing when or where the enemy would attack, that was something else entirely.

'We'll pull into the Mermaid inn for some refreshment and ask for directions to your friend's house, if that's all right with you?' he said. 'I think I need to try and stand for a little while.' He patted his leg. The aching had abated somewhat, thank goodness.

'I think I ought to stay in the coach. What if somebody sees me?' Her voice betrayed her nerves.

'Don't worry about that, it's highly unlikely. I'm sure no-one I know will be here. Don't be concerned.' He hoped his brisk tone would reassure her. Lottie gave him a wry look, and he recalled uncomfortably that he'd said the same

about Oxford.

The coach pulled into the yard of the Mermaid, the door opened, and the steps were let down. One of the footmen helped Nate to descend. He leaned heavily on the man's shoulder and used his cane in the other hand to support himself. At last he reached solid ground.

The innkeeper approached him, hands clasped in front of his pristine white apron, his head bowed obsequiously. 'Your Grace, Your Grace, I'm honoured that you have deigned to visit my humble establishment. Please come into my best parlour.'

*Good grief, he thinks I'm Wheatley. Better put him straight.* 'I'm afraid you're mistaken, sir. I am not the Duke of Wheatley, merely a friend to whom he has kindly loaned his carriage. However, I should be grateful to take you up on your very kind offer of your best parlour. The lady and I require a little light refreshment before continuing our journey.'

The innkeeper's head shot up and his mouth gaped, his disappointment at not playing host to a duke evident on his face. 'Oh, er, yes. Of course, sir.'

He gestured to Nate to follow him. Nate waited for Lottie to disembark and then started to make his painful way towards the open doorway where the landlord stood ready to lead them into the parlour.

'Major Crawford! Major Crawford! I thought it was you. Heard you were coming home,' a familiar and unwelcome voice called.

Nate stopped dead in his tracks. Of all the people to bump into. He turned to see the owner of the voice. Yes, it was Mr Denby, the vicar of Chadwick End, one of the villages near his father's estate. What the hell was he doing here? Nate decided to don his haughty officer persona – useful when dealing with lackadaisical lower ranks. He caught Lottie's arm, having heard her low gasp when the man had shouted out his name.

'Ah, Mr Denby, fancy meeting you here. I'm on my way home as it happens. I'd enjoy speaking further with you, but I'm on important business. I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention to anyone that you've seen me. Matter of state, you understand?' He fixed the man with a hard stare, then turned to continue his way into the inn, his hand still clasping Lottie's arm, hoping the man would give up his questioning and take the hint. He was to be disappointed.

'Matter of state? Is your companion a prisoner? Taking her into custody, are you? I've heard Napoleon has his spies everywhere. None of us are safe.' Nate turned to face him. Mr Denby's eyes sparkled with fear and excitement. No doubt he was in hope of learning something that wasn't common knowledge, exclusive news with which he could impress his neighbours and parishioners, thought Nate. Drat the nerve of him. Nate didn't mask his outrage.

'Certainly not,' he roared, causing Denby to take a step backwards. 'This lady is the daughter of a close friend of my father.' Nate pointedly sent his eyes towards the ducal crest on the carriage door. 'He has entrusted me to convey her home safely.'



‘Oh, yes, of course. I’ll let you on your way, Major Crawford,’ muttered a much-subdued Denby, bowing and backing away. ‘Don’t want to delay you. I beg your pardon, my lady.’

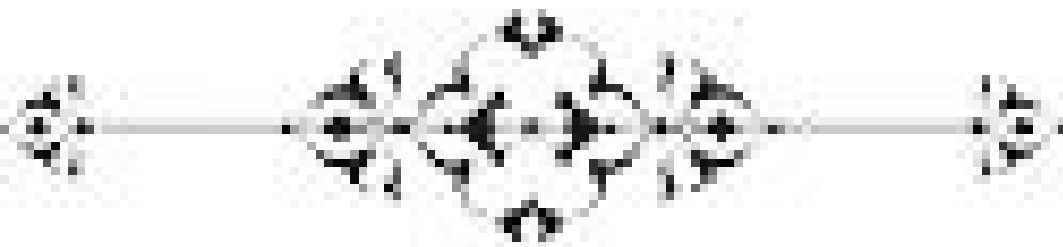
Nate gave a curt bow of his head and guided Lottie towards the inn door, determined to escape the man’s presence. They made it into the parlour without further interruptions, and Nate crashed down into one of the straight-backed chairs near the fireplace. Lottie stood white-faced, clutching her reticule.

‘Oh dear. What do we do now? He’s bound to talk. I knew I shouldn’t have got out of the carriage.’

She was starting to panic. He had to calm her down. ‘Now stop right there, Lottie,’ he ordered. ‘Don’t get upset. All he can say is that he’s seen me with an unknown female. The daughter of a friend of my father’s.’ He pointed to the bottle of wine and two glasses on the table. ‘Let’s have something to drink and we’ll find out where your Miss Spencer lives and head off shortly.’

Looking chastened, Lottie nodded and hurried to do as she was bid. Nate hoped he hadn’t frightened her too much with his display outside. He’d seen how her eyes had widened at his transformation into a brusque commanding officer when dealing with the encroaching Denby. He would have to learn to curb his propensity to take charge. He took the filled glass she passed to him and watched as she sat down, nursing her own glass in shaking hands. Her colour had returned; in fact, she was looking quite becomingly flushed. If he wasn’t very careful...

# Chapter 7



AFTER ENJOYING A SMALL repast, they were back in the coach. To Lottie's relief, Denby had disappeared, no doubt eager to spread the news of his encounter with the newly returned Major Crawford and speculating on what his state business could be.

'We need to go back along the high street a little way and find Kixley Lane,' Nate informed her. The innkeeper had been helpful in giving them directions. Apparently, the Misses Spencer were well known in the village for their good works.

'And it was such a lovely wedding. Miss Spencer looked a picture, though I should call her Mrs Ramsden now,' the innkeeper smilingly informed them as he saw them off.

Lottie's heart skipped a beat. Surely Harriet hadn't married without letting her know?

Before many minutes, the coach pulled up in front of a well-maintained timber-framed cottage. A small, neat garden enclosed by a low wall lay in front, and a path led up to the wooden front door. Lottie's heart started to pound.

Nate must have noticed her hesitation. 'Go on, what are you waiting for? I think it best if you discover if your friend is at home first and then I will come and explain what I think should be done.' He gave her one of his encouraging smiles. She was beginning to recognise how he used his face and voice to manage those in his care. She straightened her back and followed his instructions.

Lottie stepped down and unlatched the small wooden gate; it clanged with a bang behind her, giving her a start. Heart thumping, she raised her hand to grasp the door knocker, but before she could knock, the door was pulled open and Harriet stood before her. She was clasped in a warm hug.

Her friend was laughing and talking at the same time. 'I couldn't believe it. I saw the crest, thinking perhaps it was someone looking for directions, then I saw it was you. Oh, Lottie, my dear, thank you for coming. I didn't think you'd receive my letter so quickly.' Harriet pulled Lottie into a snug parlour, settled her hands on Lottie's shoulders, and examined Lottie's face. 'Let me look at you. Oh, my dear, it seems an age since we last spoke. Goodness, is it really four years?

'You do look well, Lottie.'

'It's good to see you too, Harriet. I have missed you.'

Tears welled up in Lottie's eyes as she smiled back at the handsome woman in front of her. The intervening years had been kind to her friend. Her complexion, though now blessed with a few subtle wrinkles, remained clear. Her still-abundant auburn hair was tied back in a neat coil, and that well-remembered smile hovered on her lips. It was hard to believe that Harriet must now have reached her fortieth year.

'Come, sit down. Tell me your news. Have you married, my dear? When I saw the coach – well, it is not your family coach. I don't recall your father having one so grand.' Harriet led her friend to a small sofa to one side of the fireplace, in which a fire glowed. Lottie took in her surroundings. The room was cosy, panelled with dark wood, and the smell of beeswax and lavender hung in the air. Besides the sofa, there was another well-used armchair and a couple of straight-backed wooden chairs, and a large bookcase stood against the wall opposite the leaded window, overlooking the front garden. 'I'll just tell Megs to bring us some tea. Oh dear.'

Lottie turned to see what had startled her friend and caught sight of Nate looming in the doorway. He was slumped against the doorframe, his cane in his hand and pain etched on his face. 'I'm sorry to startle you, ma'am,' he apologised. 'You must be Miss Spencer. You couldn't give me a hand, could you please, Lottie?'

Lottie leapt up to help him to a seat. She noted the surprised arch of her friend's eyebrows at Nate's familiar use of her first name. Never mind, Harriet might be shocked, but more importantly, would she help?

'Come, Nate, sit here,' said Lottie, guiding Nate towards the sofa. 'Forgive me, Harriet, but Major Crawford has a leg wound of long standing, he needs to take the weight off it. I'll introduce you properly as soon as he is comfortable.'

Harriet gave her a swift, searching glance, and answered in more restrained tones, 'Of course, please do sit down, Major Crawford. I'll arrange for some tea.' Harriet swept out of the room, leaving the door ajar, making it obvious that she was uncertain as to the propriety of leaving them alone.

Nate winced as he levered himself onto the sofa. He stretched his left leg out and kneaded his thigh. Lottie frowned. His pain appeared to be worsening, she'd not seen his face this drawn since their first meeting. He was biting his lower lip and the lines at the corner of his eyes appeared more deeply etched. This was all her fault, she knew it.

'Is there anything I can do, Major Crawford... Nate?' She knelt beside him and touched his cheek with her fingers.

His eyes, screwed tight in a grimace of pain, opened at her touch and he gazed into her face. His mouth relaxed into a smile and he leaned forward to touch her forehead with his own. 'Just keep smiling at me, Lottie, you've no idea how much that helps. I've had a few bad twinges, that's all.' He drew in a breath, as if

gathering his strength. 'Now, leave your friend to me. I'm not at all sure you'll be safe here, even if she does agree to shelter you. It will not require much effort on your cousin's part to track you, if he reaches Knowle. The innkeeper knew who she was immediately, and the inn will be the first place anyone looking for you will ask.'

She had to agree with his opinion. Harriet had mentioned a letter, but she hadn't received one from her friend for several months. Goodness, did Harriet mean that she'd written recently? Lottie's stomach lurched. If Jonah opened it, he would have her direction and he would know exactly where to find her.

The parlour door swung open, distracting Lottie from her rising panic. Harriet bustled in, issuing instructions over her shoulder to a young girl wearing an apron and mob cap, who was closely following her.

'There you go, Megs. Put it down on the table and I'll sort these tea things while you bring in the scones. I hope you don't mind, Lottie, Major Crawford. I've only got scones to offer you, no biscuits or dainties I'm afraid.'

Lottie noted the flustered look on her friend's face. Of course, she was embarrassed that she had nothing finer to offer. She must think Major Crawford very fine indeed, if she'd judged him by the appearance of the equipage that they'd turned up in. Before she could reassure her friend, Nate replied. 'Miss Spencer, anything you can offer I'm sure will be more than acceptable. I thought I could detect the smell of baking when I came in, my mouth is watering already.' He smiled that easy smile of his and Lottie almost felt jealous.

The maid reappeared with another tray laden with plates, a dish of butter, a bowl of jam, and a basket covered with a pristine white cloth, underneath which were the said scones. She placed the tray down on one of the side tables, bobbed a neat curtsy, and left the room.

The three of them sat for a moment, the silence awkward. Nate was on the sofa, his leg still stretched out and his cane lying at his side, within easy reach. He looked quite at home. Lottie had taken one of the straight-backed chairs to the side of the sofa, hands clenched in her lap. She swallowed; her mouth was dry. Harriet sat in an armchair opposite, the tables holding the tea and scones to one side. Her mouth was tense, the muscles of her face taut, concern in her eyes.

To Lottie's relief, Nate broke the silence first. 'Well, Miss Spencer, I expect you are wondering why Lottie... Miss Benham and I have called on you?'

'Indeed, sir,' Harriet replied. 'Who are you to my friend? You seem to be on very easy terms with her.' She did not hide her distrust. In softer tones, she addressed Lottie: 'I'm surprised my letter reached you so quickly, Lottie. I knew you would come, but I didn't expect you so soon. I'm very happy to see you, my dear.'

Nate interrupted before Lottie could reply. 'You have written recently to Lottie? When did you send your letter?' Harriet's face registered surprise at his urgent, brusque tone. 'It is most important, ma'am,' he added.

Lottie nodded to her friend. 'Yes, please, Harriet. When did you send it? I left

home yesterday and it hadn't arrived then.'

'Why, only yesterday. I wrote to tell you about my sister's marriage and invited you to visit. What is the matter? You look upset, Lottie. Have I done something wrong?'

Lottie felt quite ill, her nerves almost getting the better of her. 'Oh dear, this is awful, now Jonah will know where I am.' She cast an anxious look towards Nate, who leaned across and took her hand, despite Harriet's disapproving glare.

'Come now, Lottie. All is not lost. I've told you I will help, as will the duke. This will be sorted.' His calm, commanding tones and reassuring words were what she needed to hear. 'I think you will need to explain matters to your friend, Lottie. I can see she doesn't quite approve of me.' He gave Harriet a crooked smile. 'Why don't you pour the tea, Miss Spencer?' he instructed. 'Lottie could do with something to calm her nerves. She has recently been subject to some very unsettling events.' His tone was kindly but firm, and it had the effect he'd no doubt intended. Harriet bestirred herself and poured the tea.

'Is it still just milk, Lottie dear?' she asked. Lottie nodded and took the proffered cup and saucer with a hand that shook only a little. 'How do you take your tea, Major Crawford?' asked Harriet, the teapot poised over his cup.

'The same, if you please, Miss Spencer.' He took the cup from her outstretched hand. 'That's lovely, just what I needed.' He eased back into his seat, wincing as he did so.

'Would you like a stool for your leg, Major Crawford?'

Nate's easy manner was having some effect, thought Lottie, for her friend to be offering him a stool.

He shook his head. 'No thank you. I need only to stretch it for a while. We have been in the carriage since the early hours of this morning and the jolting does not help, I've found.' An involuntary moan escaped Lottie's lips. His head shot towards her. 'Now, Lottie, don't take on so.' His smile softened his reprimand. 'It was not your fault. I told you I might have fallen from my horse at any point. I was lucky that you were around. Now, please tell your friend of the situation we find ourselves in.'

Lottie gathered her wits, took a sip of her tea, and started to speak. Some minutes and several cups of tea later, Lottie concluded her story. She'd explained everything that had happened, from the point of her cousin's descending on her home, up to her own arrival in Knowle and the unexpected encounter with Major Crawford's acquaintance Mr Denby.

Harriet had gasped in shocked horror when she heard what Jonah had in store for her friend. She smiled cautiously at Nate when Lottie described how helpful he'd been and the plan he had proposed for her safety. Lottie held her breath as Harriet finally gave her opinion. 'Well, I have to say, despite the misfortune of being thought to be a married couple in Oxford, Major Crawford does seem to have the right of it, my dear.' Lottie began to breathe again, as her friend continued. 'I fear you will not be able to stay here safely. Your cousin is bound to

send someone, once my letter arrives. Oh dear, how unfortunate. I had meant to write to you earlier, but I was so caught up in Georgiana's wedding plans it quite escaped my mind until after she left.'

'Yes, your sister... I take it she is recovered from her illness?' Lottie asked.

'Yes, Dr Ramsden was so solicitous; he is such a nice man. When Georgiana got better, we couldn't understand why he kept calling... to check on her, he said.' Harriet gave a little giggle. 'Then he told her he'd admired her for some time, and she finally plucked up the courage to ask if he could court her. I'm so happy for her. She thought she was destined to be a spinster all her life.' Harriet sighed, a pleased smile on her lips. This was the Harriet Lottie remembered, unselfish and never thinking of herself, only too pleased at others' good fortune.

Nate interrupted. 'So, Miss Spencer, I would be very grateful if you would agree to chaperone Miss Benham and travel to my father's estate near Hampton in Arden. It's the only place I think she will be safe for now.'

Harriet answered immediately. 'Of course I will come with you, Lottie. My sister and her husband will be away for several weeks and they will be returning to Dr Ramsden's house at the other side of Knowle. I would only be here on my own. I had planned to spend some time with you in any case, that was why I'd written. Our father left us reasonably comfortable, and now that Georgiana is married and restored to good health, I would like to see a bit more of the world. I was so looking forward to doing some travelling with you. I know your father did not permit you to do so. You have been kept so apart from society, my dear.'

Trust Harriet to have remembered how her father had been, miserly and unwilling for her to meet anyone who might want to deprive him of her company. Lottie set her cup and saucer down and went over to clasp her friend in a hug. 'I knew I could rely on you, Harriet.'



Nate was impressed with Lottie's friend. Miss Spencer was a sensible level-headed woman. She hadn't had the vapours when told of Lottie's escape from her cousin and his vile plans, nor when they'd disclosed their subterfuge in Oxford. He was also taken aback to see how quickly Miss Spencer made her arrangements. She'd packed a bag, given instructions to her maid, and written notes to be left at her sister's new home and with the vicar, in neither case giving any indication of her whereabouts, but assuring them she was well and would be in contact soon. She

would have made a fine commissariat soldier, certainly better than some he'd known.

Soon they were bowling through the Warwickshire countryside once more, heading along the Kenilworth road towards Hampton in Arden. Once they'd crossed the packhorse bridge over the River Blythe, Nate knew it wouldn't be long before he'd face his father. Confident that his father would support his actions once he heard Lottie's story, he was less sure how his father would deal with him. He couldn't bear the thought of being treated as an invalid. He closed his eyes and tried to think.

He must have nodded off for a moment, for when he woke, he heard his two companions whispering. He kept his eyes closed, feigning sleep.

'Now, Lottie, have courage. I can see that your father succeeded in browbeating you into believing you were unable to think for yourself. I certainly believe you did the right thing by leaving your home. Your cousin sounds to be an absolute bounder. It was fortunate that you fell into Major Crawford's path.'

Nate suppressed a grin. She had definitely fallen into his path.

'Yes, Harriet. You're right,' came Lottie's whispered reply. 'Almost as soon as you'd left, Father started to tell me I was just a silly girl and that I wasn't ready to go out into society. It is insidious, is it not, how someone's words, if they are spoken often enough, begin to affect one? I hadn't realised how passive I'd become until I was forced to take charge when Father died, not knowing when Ned would return to take up the reins. Then poor Ned died, and Jonah inherited. But at least I had some time to get accustomed to being more self-reliant before he arrived. The house and estate were running efficiently, though I still hadn't the courage to venture much socially. I was on the point of contacting you. I'd hoped that we would be able to travel once I was financially independent. Then Jonah finally turned up, completely upsetting all my plans.'

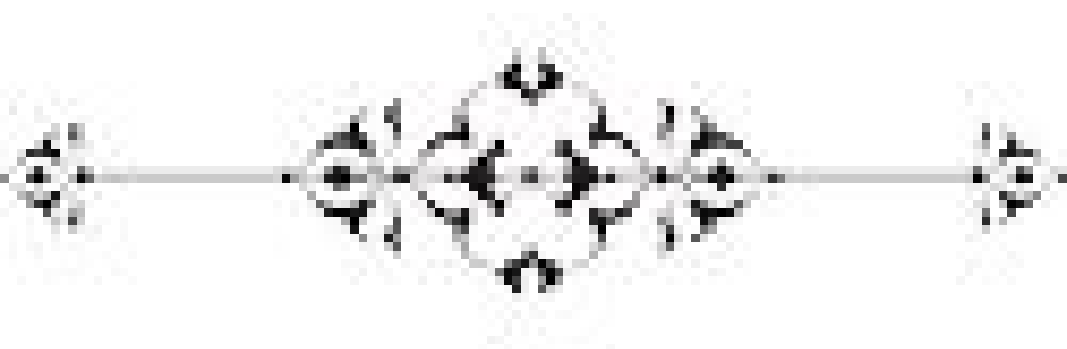
She sighed, a sound that tugged at his heartstrings. He restrained himself just in time from leaning over and taking her hand. Instead, he stretched and faked a yawn.

'Oh, Nate. Have we woken you with our chatter? I do apologise.' Lottie's eyes, now the colour of a stormy sea, regarded him anxiously from across the carriage.

How he wanted to comfort her. She was desperately in need of someone to bolster her confidence. Her friend seemed to be doing a good job, but he too needed to play his part. 'Not at all, Lottie. I shouldn't have fallen asleep in the first place, leaving you ladies to entertain yourselves. It was very rude of me.' He looked out the window to see they were leaving the outskirts of Hampton in Arden. The road to his father's estate was a short distance away. 'We'll soon be at Willow End,' he announced with a smile.

How would Father react to him turning up with not one, but two females in tow?

# Chapter 8



THE CARRIAGE TURNED UP a long drive. Lottie caught glimpses of grey stone walls, tall redbrick chimneys, and tiled roofs. The house lay in a hollow in the parkland surrounding it, and as they got closer, she espied the moat surrounding the property.

‘Oh, how lovely,’ she exclaimed. ‘See, Harriet, it has a moat; it must be very old.’

Harriet leaned forward to peer out the window as Nate elaborated, the pride evident in his voice. ‘Yes, I believe the moat dates from the thirteenth century. Of course, the original house has been rebuilt and changed several times in appearance since then. It has been in our family since Queen Elizabeth’s reign.’

The coach rolled over the bridge across the moat into the courtyard and Lottie’s gaze roamed over the façade that surrounded them on three sides. The fourth side, opposite the main entrance, consisted of a low wall covered in trailing ivy, over which could be seen the formal gardens lying beyond the moat.

The front door opened and a gentleman, whom Lottie assumed to be the butler, came down the steps to greet them. ‘Welcome home, Major Crawford. Your father will be delighted to see you. He’s been expecting you for several days.’

‘Thank you, Ferrers. Would you advise Mrs Jones that we have two lady guests joining us for a while and to make rooms ready for them, if you please?’

Not by a blink did the butler betray any surprise at this unexpected news. ‘Certainly, Major. Would you care to freshen up first or to see your father? I understand he is in the library.’

‘I think I’ll see Father first.’ Nate winced as he landed awkwardly on the gravel and Ferrers’ hand shot out to steady him as he fought to get his balance. ‘Thank



you, I'll manage now, I have my stick.' The man removed his hand and took a step back, resuming his impassive demeanour.

Lottie understood Nate's desire not to be treated as an invalid. She hoped his father did not treat him with pity. Nate held out his right arm to her; his left clutched his cane. 'Come along, Lottie. And you too, Miss Spencer.'

The three of them walked up the steps into a large entrance hall with close-studded timber-framed walls. The two ladies amended their steps to accommodate Nate's slower pace. Looking at her surroundings, Lottie guessed that this was one of the oldest parts of the building. They turned left into an even more impressive space, dominated by a magnificent stone-carved chimneypiece. The walls on either side were adorned with intricately worked tapestries. Large windows containing stained-glass heraldic devices opened out onto the courtyard. Lottie dragged her gaze away from them to follow Nate up the oak staircase to the first floor. A steel breastplate and helmet displayed on a window ledge halfway up the stairs caught her attention.

Seeing her curiosity, Nate gave their history. 'Souvenirs of the Civil War. I believe they were left behind after a visit from the Parliamentary forces. My family fought on the royalist side.'

She quirked an eyebrow. 'It seems you have the army in your blood, or certainly loyalty to your king and country.'

He shrugged. 'I only did what I could. Many did much more than I, and continue to do so.'

She knew she'd touched a nerve. Why did he feel so bad about himself? In her eyes, he was a true hero who had fought and been wounded in the service of his country.

They continued to walk along an upper gallery with windows facing onto the courtyard. The coach they'd arrived in could be seen turning, its wheels churning the gravel, to make its way back out over the moat to the stables they'd passed on the way in.

They entered a large, comfortably furnished room with a barrel ceiling and a large bay window. Without stopping, Nate guided them across to another doorway. He tapped twice on the wooden door before opening it and stepped over the threshold. Lottie and Harriet kept a few paces behind. A gentleman, Lottie guessed him to be in his fifties, with Nate's dark hair, heavily streaked with silver threads, was engrossed in a large volume laid out on the desk before him. He looked up and his frowning expression of concentration changed to one of pure joy.

'Nate, my boy, you're back at last! How good it is to see you. Come in, come in. It's been so quiet here without you.' He rushed forward to grasp Nate by the arm, then stopped abruptly when he caught sight of the two ladies hovering uncertainly in the doorway. 'You've brought guests. How wonderful, this house could do with some company. Come in, ladies. Nate, will you not introduce me?'

Lottie was warmed by the way in which Nate's father had so effusively greeted

his son. The love he had for him was there for all to see.

‘Father, it’s good to see you too and to be back home. I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve invited Miss Benham and her companion Miss Spencer to stay for a short while. When you hear about Miss Benham’s circumstances, I’m sure you’ll agree with me that this is the safest place for her.’

A puzzled expression crossed the older gentleman’s face at his son’s words, but he smiled and bowed to both the ladies.

‘Miss Lottie Benham, Miss Harriet Spencer, may I present my father, Mr Charles Crawford?’ Nate said, waving them forward.

Both ladies curtsied in turn and the older gentleman took Lottie’s hand. ‘Welcome, my dear. Come, let us retire to the drawing room and I’ll send for some tea.’ He hadn’t inquired about his son’s leg wound, although Lottie was certain he hadn’t missed how Nate leaned heavily on his cane and the drawn lines about his mouth and eyes. Mr Crawford placed Lottie’s hand in the crook of his arm and led her back out of the library. Gesturing for her to sit on one of the sofas, he tugged on the bell pull to summon the butler. Harriet joined her friend on the sofa and Nate sat down opposite, his left leg stretched out. His father stood with his back to the fire, his face beaming at his visitors. Lottie had rarely seen someone so pleased, though she also noted the surreptitious and momentary glances of concern he kept casting at his son.

‘Well, this is grand,’ said Nate’s father, rubbing his hands together. ‘But I’m forgetting, would you prefer a brandy, Nate, instead of tea? And you too, ladies, please say if you would like something more fortifying.’

‘Tea would be lovely, Mr Crawford. I’m so sorry to be a trouble to you, Nate said...’ Lottie started, but was interrupted by Nate.

‘Lottie, please don’t worry. You are no trouble to me or my father.’

‘Of course you’re not, my dear Miss Benham,’ said Nate’s father as he stepped to the sideboard to pour two generous glasses of brandy.

The butler appeared bearing a tray with tea things and accompanied by a young maid, also carrying a tray of cakes and biscuits. ‘I took the liberty of anticipating, sir. I hope you don’t mind. Mrs Humphries has been baking all week in expectation of you arriving, Major. She’s delighted to have you back.’

Nate grinned. ‘Tell her I’ve missed her cooking, won’t you Ferrers? I’ll come down shortly to say hello to everyone.’

‘Have you asked Mrs Jones to see to rooms for the ladies, Ferrers?’ Mr Crawford inquired.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied the butler. ‘Mrs Jones thought the yellow room and the adjoining blue room, if that’s acceptable to you, sir.’

‘Yes indeed.’ Mr Crawford smiled at Lottie and Harriet, his eyes lingering on the older lady. ‘They’re both pleasant rooms, ladies, just along the corridor from here, off the upper gallery. They each have excellent views overlooking the moat and the south gardens.’

‘You are too kind, sir,’ Lottie replied, overwhelmed by Nate’s father’s generous

acceptance of their presence. Beside her, Harriet blushed and inclined her head. Lottie had never seen her friend so discomposed before.

‘Miss Spencer, would you do the honours and pour the tea?’ inquired Mr Crawford with an encouraging smile. ‘I declare it is too long since we’ve had the company of ladies. I’d quite forgotten the intricacies of tea time.’

‘It would be my pleasure, Mr Crawford,’ she answered. Lottie wondered if she was the only one who noticed how her friend’s hand shook as she poured the tea. How odd, normally nothing upset her friend’s equilibrium. She recalled how Harriet had stood up to her father when he was being particularly trying. Perhaps her nerves were due to the strain of their circumstances and tiredness from the sudden and unexpected journey.


After partaking of refreshments and exchanging small talk for some moments, Nate started to introduce the reason for the ladies’ presence. ‘Father, you must be puzzling why...’

‘Yes, indeed, I was wondering when you were going to tell me everything,’ the elder Crawford cut in with a wry smile. He had a gleam in his eye and Lottie could see where Nate got his charm and good looks from.

Mr Crawford’s face conveyed his emotions as he listened to his son’s tale. He winced when Nate told of his fall, and his face softened when he comprehended the necessity for his son’s walking cane. His eyes widened with shock and disgust at the revelation of Jonah’s plans, and he nodded his vigorous agreement when Nate wound up his explanation with his reasons for bringing the ladies to Willow End.

‘Very wise of you, Nate,’ Mr Crawford agreed. ‘Miss Benham and Miss Spencer will assuredly be better off staying here.’ He turned to Lottie, his eyes crinkling in a smile. ‘I would be honoured to offer you shelter, my dear, and you too, Miss Spencer.’ He bestowed a warm smile on Harriet. ‘We can’t allow this scoundrel to succeed with his despicable plans. By what you tell me, Nate, the Duke of Wheatley is also in agreement.’ Mr Crawford stroked his chin. ‘I must say, I am surprised though. I’ve never met the gentleman, but I’ve heard that he is reclusive and can be ruthless in his dealings.’ He shook his head. ‘Well, if he is a friend of Francis Heslop, I’m sure he can be trusted.’ He leaned over and in a confidential tone added, ‘Francis and his mother were our neighbours when Nate was growing up. A sad story, but he was a decent young man. I’m pleased to know he has such an influential and powerful sponsor.’

Lottie wondered about the sad story concerning Francis. Whatever it was, he seemed to be now well recovered from any past ills.



Some time later, Lottie and Harriet were shown to their rooms by the housekeeper. Lottie's room was panelled in oak and contained a large fireplace and a handsome tester bed. The curtains and bed-hangings were of yellow damask, which no doubt accounted for the room's name. A small dressing room adjoined. Lottie's stomach gave a sudden lurch. How unworthy she was of such splendid surroundings. Good grief, apart from her nightgown and a chemise in her overstuffed valise, she only had the clothes she stood up in. She sat down on the edge of the bed to consider.

*This will never do. I'm a grown woman, not a child. I will not give in to lowering thoughts. I've been so lucky to meet Nate. What would I have done without him? And Harriet too. She's been a true friend, packing up at a moment's notice to accompany me. I really am blessed. Nate's father is such a dear man, accepting me without a blink. I shouldn't be despondent about a few missing dresses.*

Her mind returned to Nate. His military background accounted for the fact that at times he was a bit brusque and almost intimidating, but he was also kind and considerate. He'd been magnificent when dealing with the vicar in Knowle; it had sent her pulse racing in a quite delicious way. No-one had ever been that protective of her before, not even Ned. She sighed. He probably had his pick of eligible females, elegant London ladies or those from local Warwickshire society. She couldn't allow herself to develop deeper feelings for him, she would only be disappointed.

Someone tapped on the door, jolting her out of her introspection. 'Come in,' she called.

A young woman in a neat white apron entered, clutching a bundle of clothes. She bobbed a curtsy and addressed Lottie in hesitant tones. 'Excuse me, Miss. Mrs Jones said that I was to be your maid for your stay here. I'm Susan. She also sent these for your approval.' She proffered the bundle, which Lottie took from her and laid on the bed. There were two dresses, a little old fashioned, but obviously not much worn, and an assortment of underclothes, stockings, and night-rails.

Goodness, where had these come from? She turned to the maid, who answered her unspoken question. 'Oh, they belonged to the late Mrs Crawford. Major Crawford asked Mrs Jones to look some things out for you because you have lost all your luggage.'

Lottie was aghast. 'But I couldn't possibly,' she protested. 'Oh dear, what will Mr Crawford say if he sees me wearing his wife's clothes? I'll gladly take the night things and some of the underwear, but the dresses... no, no. It will be an awful reminder for him. Please take them back and convey my sincere thanks for the other items.'

'Yes, Miss,' said the maid, obediently scooping up the dresses. 'I'll return directly to do your hair for dinner.' Bare minutes passed when there was another, much louder rap on the bedroom door.

'Enter,' bade Lottie, wondering who it could be. The door opened to disclose to her shocked gaze the senior Mr Crawford, with Susan behind him, still clutching the dresses.

'Now what's all this I hear?' Mr Crawford's voice was gruff, but not unkind as he strode into the room. 'Miss Benham, please accept these dresses. I'm sure they can be altered to fit. My son has told me of your predicament. It would not be safe for you to venture out to purchase new clothes. Certainly not until Nate is more recovered to offer sufficient protection.'

'Oh dear, it's not that. I did not want to be a reminder to you, your wife...' She trailed off, blushing. She couldn't look him in the eye, it felt so awkward.

'Nonsense,' he barked, but not unkindly. How he sounded like his son. 'It will be a pleasure to see my dear Amy's dresses adorning such a lovely young lady as yourself.' He swiped his hand across his eyes. 'I miss her, that's true, and there will be a special place in my heart that will always be hers, but... well, she is gone.' His mouth twisted, and it was plain to Lottie that it was costing him some effort to confide such personal matters. 'It has taken me a long time, but I have accepted that finally. I have to get on with what's left of my life, and I don't intend to spend it dwelling on what can never be.' He took Lottie's hand in his. 'Please humour me in this, Miss Benham. You appear to be a sensible lady and you need some clothes.' He arched his eyebrow and gestured for Susan to bring the dresses back into the room.

Lottie knew when she was beaten. 'If you insist, Mr Crawford. I'm very grateful for your generosity.'

He beamed at her. 'Splendid, splendid,' he chortled. 'Nate told me you were an intelligent young lady; I can see he was right. Susan, help Miss Benham if she requires it and do bring some more dresses, two will barely suffice until we can arrange for some new ones to be made.'

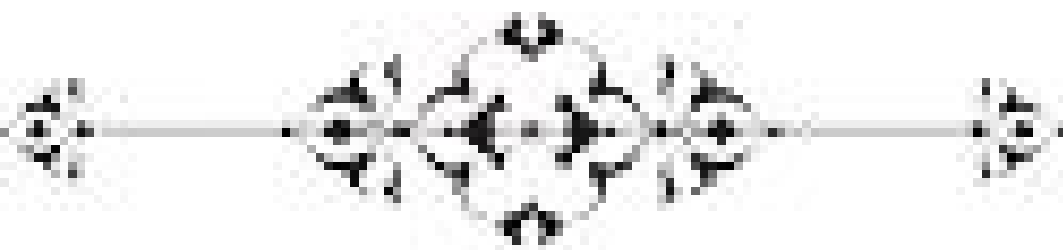
'But, Mr Crawford...' Lottie tried to interrupt but he raised a finger as a signal for her to cease speaking. He might not have had the military career of his son, but he knew how to exact obedience.

'Now, Miss Benham, don't argue. I know ladies like to look their best. The two trunks of my wife's dresses are at your disposal. She would be pleased to know someone is getting the benefit of them, and believe me, it would please me greatly also. I'll leave you now. Dinner will be served at eight o'clock. Susan will show you and Miss Spencer the way to the drawing room when you are ready.'

He gave her a satisfied smile, a bow of his head, and strode off.

Lottie shrugged and turned to the waiting maid. 'Well, it looks like I will be wearing one of these. Shall we see if they fit?'

# Chapter 9



THAT EVENING FOUND EVERYONE, except Nate, gathered in the pleasantly appointed drawing room. The curtains were drawn, the candles were lit, and the fire in the grate cast a warming glow over the whole. A woman's hand had evidently been at work in the embroidered cushions and footstools and other little touches that adorned the room. All a little faded, they were a sad testament to the loss of Nate's mother.

Earlier, before dining, Mr Crawford had explained that his son, with a little persuasion on his part, had decided to be sensible and keep the weight off his bad leg. He was having a tray in his room and would hopefully be feeling a little easier on the morrow.

Now they were seated once more, chatting easily, with Mr Crawford sipping port and Lottie and Harriet drinking tea. It was Mr Crawford who eventually raised the question of his son's health. 'I have to say, I was a trifle shocked when I saw him looking so pale and obviously in pain.'

Lottie blushed, nerves causing her teacup to knock against her saucer. 'I'm afraid it's all my fault, Mr Crawford. If I hadn't startled his horse, he would never have fallen. I feel dreadfully about it.' Guilty tears began to prick at her eyes.

'Now, now, Miss Benham, do not be foolish. Nate has told me how things happened. I do not believe he would have got here without mishap in any case. He shouldn't have been riding at all, he always did try to push himself too far.' Mr Crawford sighed, raking a hand through his hair. 'I don't know why he always feels he has to do more than the next man, as if he has something to prove. Goodness knows, his mother and I were forever telling him how proud we were of him. I couldn't ask for a better son.'

'I think, perhaps, your son feels guilty about surviving when many of his friends did not, sir. He did say something of the sort to me earlier, which makes me think that is the reason he pushes himself,' Lottie ventured.

Mr Crawford, rubbing his chin, answered, 'Aye, you could be right, Miss Benham. Very perceptive of you. He was very low when he returned, wouldn't talk much about his experiences. The friend who brought him home, Major Napier, hinted that he would need careful handling. Said he'd gone through a

‘No bad time on the journey back, and not just with his leg wound. Didn’t quite take his meaning at the time.’ He paused to sip his port, looking thoughtful. ‘Nate was always fit and active, always at the centre of things, the leader, if you like, of the young men hereabouts. He was mad to join the army, to do his bit. I couldn’t refuse him. Everything was going so well, all the men under his command respected and liked him. He’d been mentioned in dispatches for his bravery, you know.’ At Lottie’s look of surprise he continued, ‘I see he did not share that with you.’

‘No, sir, he is very modest about his achievements, but I should have guessed. He has been nothing but chivalrous and resourceful since I have met him.’ She bit her lip. ‘I don’t know how I would have fared without him.’

Harriet, who had been sitting quietly, moved to put a comforting arm around her friend. Mr Crawford leaned across from his seat opposite and took Lottie’s hand. ‘Well, I’m glad for one that he did meet you, Miss Benham. I can see he now has a purpose in helping you. Just what he needs. I confess, I was concerned about him. He was unable to continue his work at Horse Guards, and I knew he would probably be bored helping me with the estate. That’s why I hinted in my letters to him that I was becoming frail and unable to cope on my own. I thought if he took control of the estate it would help him recover.’

Both ladies regarded the hale and healthy gentleman facing them. How did he think he would convince his very intelligent son that he was incapable of running his estate without help?

To Lottie’s surprise it was Harriet who broke the ensuing silence. ‘I’m sure you mean well, Mr Crawford, but your son is not a dullwit. From my very brief observation, his pride is hurt by not being able to offer all the protection to Lottie that he believes she merits. It must be a terrible burden for one who has previously been a leader of men. I think he will discover your subterfuge in very short order.’ Harriet paused under Mr Crawford’s hard stare, then seemed to find the resolve to continue. ‘Might I suggest that you give him only a certain proportion of the estate business to manage, say perhaps where he is required to deal with people who you feel are... shall we say, difficult to deal with?’ Harriet halted, her bottom lip caught under her teeth, her embarrassment obvious at offering this forthright suggestion.

Mr Crawford continued to stare, his grey eyes intense and his mouth set. Lottie tensed, anticipating his likely reaction. All was silent, apart from the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. A low rumble began to emanate from Mr Crawford’s chest, before finally emerging as a full-blown guffaw. ‘By Jove, I do believe you are correct, Miss Spencer. I’m going about it all wrong.’ Lottie let out a relieved breath as Mr Crawford slapped his thigh and laughed a deep, booming laugh. ‘Of course he’ll see through me in a moment. You’re a very clever lady, Miss Spencer.’ He grinned at Harriet. ‘Nate likes nothing better than working with people. His men adored him, and the number of stories I heard of how he had turned some of the most unlikely characters into efficient soldiers proves he



is capable. Yes, that's exactly what I'll do.' He leaned back in his seat and beamed at them. 'Right, now that's settled. Would either of you ladies care for a game of chess?'

Relief flooded through Lottie. From her brief acquaintance with Nate's character and behaviour, she should have known his father would be a reasonable, even-tempered, and kindly man. But despite her relief, she couldn't face a game of chess. It required too much concentration, and after all the excitements of the long day she longed for her bed. Excusing herself, she left Harriet and Mr Crawford to their game.



Sometime after midnight, Lottie awoke with a start. A noise or some other disturbance had impinged on her consciousness, rousing her from a deep sleep. Her room was in darkness, the only light coming from the dying embers of the fire in the grate. She lay still, her ears pricked to catch any sound, the hair on the back of her neck standing on end. All was silent. She sat up to take a sip of water from the glass on her nightstand. A deep, low moan cut through the air, and she froze in mid-movement, her spine tingling with fear.

Another moan shattered the stillness of the night, shocking her into action. Without pausing to think, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stretched until her toes touched the wooden floor. She grasped the dressing robe that the maid had left draped across the bottom of the bed, shrugged her arms into its silky softness, and quickly tied the sash. Edging towards the door, she halted; to go outside without a light would be foolish. She scanned the dark room for the chamberstick. Luckily, the glow from the fireplace was sufficient for her to locate it, next to her glass of water on the nightstand. She remembered the spills on the mantelpiece, and taking one, she held it to the embers until it caught, then used it to relight the candle. Feeling better equipped to cope with the unknown, she made for the door.

The handle turned noiselessly at her touch and she poked her head out to peer into the corridor. Silver moonlight poured through the windows, illuminating the whole and making her candle redundant. Nevertheless, she decided to hold onto it. If the noise had come from downstairs, she would need its light to negotiate her way where the moon's light did not penetrate. She took a few steps then halted, her ears alert and her skin prickling with the chill of the cooler air outside.

her room. The wooden floorboards were smooth beneath her bare feet.

She moved into the hallway until her feet met the warmth of the woollen runner stretching the length of the corridor; if she stayed on it, it would muffle the sound of her footsteps. She was almost sure that the noise had come from the right, the other side of the stairwell. This was confirmed when it came again, cutting through the eerie silence. A groan, then a thud, as if something or someone had fallen, followed by more moans and what sounded like something being dragged across the floor.

Despite the goose bumps on her arms, her stretched nerves, and a nagging inner voice urging her to turn back into her room and lock the door securely behind her, Lottie continued to advance towards the source of the disturbance. She halted to listen at the first door after the opening to the staircase. Yes, someone or something was moving inside. She tapped, waited a few seconds, then, hearing no response, turned the handle. The door was not locked and opened smoothly. She started to step inside, then halted, shocked by the scene before her.

Lying on the floor by the side of his bed was Nate, all tangled up in his bedclothes. She knew immediately it was him, despite the meagre light afforded by her candle. His tousled hair lay damp across his forehead. There was the same masculine scent she'd smelt in the inn room in Oxford. He was thrashing around, lunging with his fists, one of them curled round an invisible sabre. Every so often, he jerked his leg, causing him to moan – the sound that had called to her.

Without thinking, she set the chamberstick down near the door, rushed over, and tried to grasp his flailing arm.

'Major! Nate! Nate, it is I, Lottie. Wake up, you're having a bad dream,' she hissed in as loud a voice as she dared. Lord, he appeared to be having a nightmare. She knew laudanum could have that effect, but he had eschewed taking any previously. Had the pain got so bad that opiates were now a necessity?

'Damn you, you bastard! Die, die! Oh God... the blood. Ponsonby, get up. Behind me, man, I'll get us to safety.' His voice was hoarse and raw. He lunged at her and caught her off balance. She landed with a thud on her bottom, her legs sprawled out in front of her. She yelped in pain.

'What? What's that?' he growled. 'Who's there?' Then, 'Oh God, where am I?' There was unmistakeable anguish in his voice, so raw it made her catch her breath. Had he finally come to his senses?

'It's me. It's Lottie,' she whispered, trying to keep her voice calm. 'I heard a noise and came to investigate. I... I found you on the floor. Are you all right?' She lay still, propped up on her elbows, uncertain of moving in case she was mistaken in her assessment of his mental condition and he lashed out again.

He didn't reply immediately. His panting breaths subsided, and he cleared his throat. 'Lottie... my dear. I'm fine, just a bit of a bad dream.' His voice was laboured, husky, as if speaking was an effort. 'Don't know how I got down here...

must have been trying to get myself some water and rolled out.’ He gave a chuckle that was patently false. ‘What a muttonhead I am! Don’t worry about me. Return to your room and get some sleep.’

She knew what he was doing. Embarrassed at being found in this state, he was making light of his predicament and trying to force her to leave. She wasn’t going to abandon him. She tucked her legs under her and rose up. Thank goodness the light was minimal and he couldn’t see her bare legs now.

‘I’ll leave in a minute,’ she said. ‘I’ll help you back into your bed first, you can’t stay on the floor all night, and I don’t want to waken the whole household.’ Reaching out, she grasped his arm.

He allowed her to take it, then pulled away. ‘Stop,’ he groaned. ‘This cursed blanket is wrapped round my leg.’ He winced as he slowly moved his left leg to pull the blanket away. She helped to remove it and as she did, glimpsed the bare muscular length of his right leg where his nightshirt had ridden up. The fleeting thought crossed her mind of the cruelty of a battle wound reducing someone, previously so fit, to flailing about helplessly on the floor. But she didn’t pity him, rather she was impressed with the way he handled his physical impairment, refusing to be constrained by it. He was truly impressive in every respect.

She gathered her wandering wits, momentarily distracted by her proximity to his sheer masculine presence. ‘Here, lean on me, that’s right.’

He struggled up, and with her help he shuffled nearer to the bed and launched himself onto the mattress. Trembling, not only from the effort of supporting himself but also from the effect of being near to him... touching him... feeling him, Lottie retrieved her candle and padded back over to the bed. He was lying, eyes closed, with beads of perspiration glistening on his brow. Reluctant to leave him in this state, she wondered what to do.



Nate lay motionless, gathering his strength. His pulse was still rapid, his heart thumping in his chest as if he had run a marathon, not merely crawled across the floor. It had taken quite some effort to get back into bed, even with her help. His senses tingled knowing she was nearby. She hadn’t followed his instruction to return to her room. He opened one eye to see her peering anxiously at him, the second time he’d awoken to find her watching him.

He smiled but kept his tone brusque. ‘Are you still here? Could you pour me

some water please?’ God, he was a brute. It was no good, he couldn’t allow her to think he didn’t care about what she had done. ‘You’re an angel, you know,’ he added more softly. ‘What would I have done if you hadn’t heard me?’

Despite the pain in his leg, he craved her company in bed, her body next to his so he could curl up and relax against her soft warmth. He wasn’t capable of anything else in his present state, but whenever she was near, he felt good – more of a man, less of an invalid. Though God knows, he’d been nothing but an invalid since he’d met her. He watched as she poured water from the jug on his nightstand into a glass. Her hand shook, spilling droplets on the polished surface.

‘What nonsense. An angel indeed, I’m not at all. Here you are, just take small sips.’ He felt her arm go round his neck, supporting his head so that he could drink. Her words had come out matter-of-fact, but he knew by her trembling that she was not as calm as she was trying to appear. He inhaled, savouring her scent, a hint of flowers and something else – feminine and comforting, and definitely her. Her warm breath brushed his cheeks. He wanted to remain like that forever.

His common sense intruded. Reluctant though he was to leave the curve of her arm, she couldn’t stay. If Miss Spencer or his father discovered them, there would be hell to pay.

He smiled up at her. ‘I’m fine now, thank you. You go back to your room and please don’t tell anyone of my... mishap.’ He’d managed to keep the fact that he endured regular nightmares a secret from his father. What would he think of his brave son then if he discovered him trembling in fear in his bed?

‘As if I would,’ she answered. ‘I would be more embarrassed by it than you, you know.’

Jolted by her words, he looked away. ‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. Of course it would affect you more. I was not thinking, too concerned with my own feelings. It was very wrong of me. Please forgive me.’ He was appalled at his lack of sensitivity. How could anyone knowing he had nightmares compare with the shame that would be brought down on her head if they were discovered together in his bedchamber? His pain was addling his wits.

‘Don’t worry. I’ll not breathe a word.’ She put a finger to her mouth to indicate her silence. ‘Now, I just need to get back to my room. Are you sure you will be all right for now?’

‘Yes, I will, and... thank you for rescuing me. That’s the second time now, you know. It’s becoming a habit.’ He grinned up at her and winked. He would swear she was blushing as she slipped out of the door, closing it gently behind her.

He lay back on his pillow, arms behind his head. He hadn’t had an episode like that for some nights. Trust it to return now, and for Lottie to hear him. But at least it had been Lottie and not his father... or worse, the servants. He shivered.

He thought again of Lottie, picturing her as she’d been when they’d first met. In their very short acquaintance, he’d learned to trust her. She’d not balked at helping him, had not been disgusted by his weakness. If he’d been fit, he would have tackled her poxy cousin by now, made sure she was safe. Just a few days’

rest should see him back on his feet. That's right, rest for a few days, then sort things out.

His mind, between wakefulness and sleep, skittered about, then the solution came to him. He'd marry her. *I need to settle down, and there's no denying she's damnably attractive.* She'd have made a fine soldier's wife, with her nerves of steel. Doubts crept in. Would she wish a cripple for a husband? *She's an heiress. She'll think I only want her money. It's not her money I desire.*

He chuckled, remembering how Lottie had kept her nerve in Oxford and how she'd dealt with the formidable Mrs Grover. He didn't want some docile miss for his life's partner, and Lottie, once he'd bolstered her confidence, was not the docile meek type at all. Would another woman have braved a dark, unfamiliar house to investigate strange noises? He didn't think so.

He recalled the feel of her body as she'd helped him back into bed, and the sight of her bare legs, as she'd sprawled on the floor after he'd accidentally knocked her over. She'd been unaware that her candle placed near the door illuminated her figure through her flimsy nightclothes. Oh, Lord, what a figure! He ran his tongue over his lips. It was probably just as well that he was unable to act on his desires.

The more he considered, the more he convinced himself that marriage would solve both their problems. In fact, he'd never been more certain of anything. A good judge of character... he'd had to be in his army career, had to know those men who would stand fast, and those who would waver when under fire. Lives had depended on his judgement. And he knew she was the woman for him. He'd just have to convince her that he was the right man for her. His first task was to get better. Not be an invalid. Yes, a few days' rest should do it.



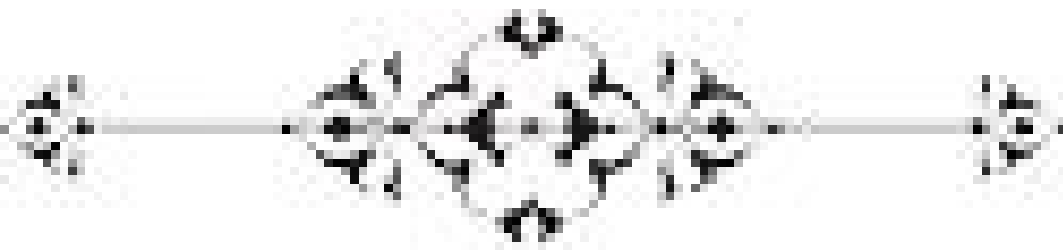
Back safely in her room, and grateful that no-one else in the household had been awakened, Lottie climbed back into her bed. She was shaking. What had she been thinking, to explore a strange house? Worse still, entering a gentleman's room. She'd done it without a second thought. It was as if her instincts had told her that Nate needed her, and she'd gone to him. He'd looked after her in her hour of need, she could do no less for him. She recalled their first encounter outside Oxford. He'd been the epitome of masculine grace, his words charming her as much as his devastating smile. But she'd discerned the vulnerability behind his

façade of easy-going control, the inner discipline that forced him to act as if pain never tortured him, using humour to deflect probing questions.

Mr Crawford had confided that he too was anxious about his son... something to do with his mental state. Did he know about Nate's nightmares? Puzzlingly, there had been no nightmare in Oxford; perhaps they were not such regular occurrences. It would indeed be awful to be plagued by them. Unsurprisingly, she had suffered one the night she'd discovered her cousin's plans – fear had all but consumed her from the point of Jonah's arrival until she'd fallen into Major Nate Crawford's path. Then everything had changed. He'd given her confidence to believe that matters would be sorted. He'd taken control, and she'd trusted him from the outset. She'd been right to do so. She was so fortunate matters had turned out the way they had.

But she couldn't stay here forever. Nate would want to get on with his own life and not be burdened with her problems. She knew he'd only recently left London; he must surely have a sweetheart there. Someone with his character and bearing would be very attractive to young ladies seeking a husband. And he was a war hero. She sighed. If only she had the sophisticated allures that he might find attractive. He was everything she wanted in a man. She turned onto her side, thumping the pillow with unusual violence before resting her head and drifting off to sleep.

# Chapter 10



THE FOLLOWING MORNING LOTTIE arose and, wrapping herself in the pretty *cashemire* shawl, one of the items the maid had brought for her the previous day, she stepped to the window to take in the view. It was a crisp spring day. White clouds scudded across the sky, blown by the still-sharp winds of winter's end. Daffodils swayed under the budding fruit trees lining the walled garden. Beyond lay woodland, stretching into the distance.

An impulse prompted her to open the window and inhale the fresh cold air. It felt good. Her cheeks tingled, and the faint scent of pine wafting over from the nearby woodland tickled her nose. Directly below her window was the moat, reinforcing her impression of being in a safe fortress, secure from Jonah's dastardly plans. She shivered, both with cold and at the recollection of Jonah's words. She vowed to kill herself before submitting to what he had planned. That or kill him. Why should she perish because her cousin was a complete blackguard?

She shocked herself with her uncharacteristic violent thoughts; she'd usually been so passive and docile. She abhorred violence. But running away and being forced to think for herself had changed that. Yes, she'd had help, but Nate had not bullied or coerced her, he'd discussed matters – made her feel her opinions counted. She was stronger because of him. The blood rushed to her cheeks as she recalled the previous night. Yes, Major Nate Crawford was someone very special, an honourable and steadfast gentleman. Her shoulders rose and fell in a deep sigh.

She washed and dressed without the help of the maid, who was surprised to find her up and about before the fire had been lit and the room warmed. 'Sorry, Miss, I'd have been here earlier if I'd known you were up.' The maid glanced sheepishly at Lottie as she placed a steaming cup of chocolate on the side table. 'Mr Crawford's instructions were not to disturb you or Miss Spencer before nine o'clock. He said you would need your sleep.'

'Don't worry, Susan. I've never been one to lie in bed,' Lottie reassured her. She allowed the girl to fix her hair whilst she sipped at her cup of chocolate. Soon she was ready to face the world.

Nate's father was already seated in the dining room and tucking in to a large plate of what looked like steak and coddled eggs when Lottie finally joined him. He stood up as she entered, his voice jovial and welcoming as he gestured her towards the table. 'Come in, come in, Miss Benham. Let me get you seated. I wasn't expecting you to be down so early, did you not sleep well?'

Lottie blushed, remembering her adventure. 'Oh yes, I slept very well, thank you, Mr Crawford. I'm accustomed to rising early. Father was always an early riser and he expected me to be ready to take his notes. He was a scholar, you see.'

Mr Crawford cocked his head to one side, his eyes alert. 'Indeed? What were his interests?'

'He was working on a catalogue of Greek texts and corresponded frequently with fellow scholars and academic colleagues, so he was always writing letters and papers for publication. He decided he did not need the expense of employing a secretary once I turned sixteen.'

'Well, my dear, you must be a very accomplished and learned young lady. Do you enjoy reading the classical authors?' His eyes twinkled at her.

Wondering where this questioning was leading, as she believed not many gentlemen approved of educated females, she decided to be honest. 'Yes, I do. Father taught me Latin and Greek so that I would be of use to him. He had a very well-stocked library to which I had access. When I had free time, of course.'

She paused, remembering how, up to her father's death, she'd had very little time to herself, especially after Harriet's departure. Helping her father and also running the household had been her entire life. Fortunately, the housekeeper, Mrs Fowler, had been with them for years and knew how the domestic side of things was ordered, so most of that did not require too much from her. When her father died, Lottie's evenings became her own again, an opportunity that she relished, poring over all the volumes that had tempted her for years and which she'd previously been unable to enjoy.

Mr Crawford rubbed his chin, a thoughtful expression on his face. 'Well, well, how interesting. That is good news. You must avail yourself of my library, Miss Benham. Nate has it well stocked. He studied the classics, you know. It seems you have much in common. Now what would you like to eat? I'll serve you myself.'

Looking pleased with himself, though she couldn't understand why, Mr Crawford went to the sideboard, which was laden with covered dishes. 'We have eggs, bacon, sausages, beefsteak, bread, preserves, or shall I just serve you with a selection?'

'Thank you, Mr Crawford, just bread and jam for me, please.'

He was returning with Lottie's plate when the door opened and Harriet entered, her face momentarily registering surprise. 'Oh, excuse me, I'm sorry I am late. Good morning, Mr Crawford, good morning, Lottie. You are looking much refreshed, my dear.'

Mr Crawford set Lottie's plate down in front of her and hastened towards



Harriet to take her arm. 'Miss Spencer, good morning. You are looking very well today, if I may say. Now come and sit down and permit me to serve you.'

He pulled out the chair next to his own and smiled at Harriet. 'May I tempt you to something more substantial than Miss Benham has chosen, dear lady? My cook has excelled herself this morning, it would be a pity to disappoint her.'

Harriet looked at Lottie's plate and her eyes widened. 'Are you not hungry, my dear?'

'I don't eat much in the mornings these days,' Lottie lied. In truth, her insides were churning and her mouth so dry with nerves, she wasn't sure she would be able to swallow a mouthful.

Harriet shot her a disbelieving look, then turned back to Mr Crawford. 'If I might suggest, just one sausage and one egg would be more than sufficient for me, Mr Crawford.'


Mr Crawford set about to prepare a plate for Harriet and returned to the table. 'I've just put a few other items on your plate, Miss Spencer. You might like to try them, but don't feel obliged.' He placed a dish containing rather more than she'd requested in front of her – a small portion of devilled kidneys, two perfect mushrooms, and a daintily cut tomato.

'Oh,' Harriet flushed as she regarded her plate. 'I'll do my best, Mr Crawford. I would not like to disappoint your cook.' Lottie saw the look that Mr Crawford beamed back at her friend. She also took note of Harriet; she was definitely more relaxed in Mr Crawford's company this morning. Perhaps they had discovered some common interests during their game of chess. In fact, to hear them chatter, one would think they had been friends for some time.

Their meal at an end, Mr Crawford offered to show the ladies around the grounds and gardens. 'It's such a lovely day, it seems a shame to spend it all indoors. After lunch I will show you the house. It was built in Tudor times, you know.' He stroked his chin, then a gleam appeared in his eyes. 'Oh, and I must show you the priest holes, Miss Spencer. You said you were interested in history.'

The morning sped by, and Lottie barely had time to wonder how Nate was. Mr Crawford was in his element, escorting them first round the formal gardens within the enclosed courtyard, and then the walled garden on the other side of the moat. Encouraged by their favourable responses to his descriptions of his carp ponds and the woodland, they explored these next. The spring sunshine displayed the estate at its best, and Lottie knew she could easily become enchanted by such a lovely place. She had the same affection for her own home. Although on her mother's death it had become a sombre place, a prison almost, thanks to her father, it held her happiest memories of childhood. She resented the fact that it now belonged to Jonah. She wondered how matters presently stood at her old home. Was Jonah taking his bad temper out on Mrs Fowler and the other loyal servants? Had they been made to suffer for her escape? She had confided her hasty plans to no-one, hoping their ignorance would save them from her cousin's wrath. Feelings of guilt at her servants' fate made the remainder of her morning

quite uncomfortable.



Nate was in the drawing room when they returned, resting on the sofa with one leg propped up on a stool. Despite his affected air of relaxation, however, he was tense, wondering how to handle things. At the sight of the company, his frown disappeared as his eyes sought Lottie. 'There you all are. I thought I'd been abandoned. I'd almost resigned myself to dining alone,' he quipped.

His father strolled over to the fireplace rubbing his hands. 'As if we would, Nate.' He chuckled. 'My goodness, I didn't realise how chilly it was out there. Come on in, ladies. Warm yourselves by the fire. Be a gentleman, Nate, and make room on the sofa for Miss Benham. There you go, my dear.' Mr Crawford gestured to Lottie to seat herself next to Nate, who silently thanked his father.

Nate, noting Lottie's blush and hesitation, patted the cushion next to him. 'Come, sit down. My leg is much easier this morning. It's wonderful what a night's sleep can do.' It was all he could do not to wink at her. Did she remember last night as clearly as he did? 'I've had barely a twinge this morning,' he added, lying through his teeth. He relaxed back into the cushions, arms behind his head. 'Well, where have you been? Has Father been boring you with the history of our house?'

It was Miss Spencer who answered him as she sat down on the sofa opposite. 'Not at all. Your father has been most kind and shown us round the formal gardens and the woodland. It really is very beautiful with all the spring flowers at the moment.' Nate dragged his eyes from Lottie and observed her companion. Harriet's complexion was becomingly pink. For an older woman, she was very attractive. He shot a glance at his father, who was also gazing at Harriet, a smile on his lips and... was that a twinkle in his eyes? Well, this was interesting.

Nate turned to Lottie, seated stiffly beside him; she hadn't been this ill at ease with him the previous day. Perhaps some small talk would unfreeze her. 'Did you enjoy the gardens, Lottie?' he asked.

'Yes,' she answered, darting a look at him, then looking away again. 'Harriet is right, they really are lovely. I do love springtime and I can see someone has put a lot of thought into the planting of the spring bulbs.' Harriet wasn't the only lady whose cheeks had a rosy glow.

Relieved that Lottie had found her voice, he tried to keep their dialogue going.

Yes, Mother enjoyed gardening. When ever I go out there I'm reminded of the pleasure she took in deciding where each plant should be placed.'

'Do you enjoy gardening, Miss Spencer?' cut in his father, seating himself beside that lady.

'Me? Oh yes, but I'm afraid I lack the talent that your late wife obviously had for knowing how the colours would look when in bloom. She must have been quite exceptional.'

Nate was grateful for the tact shown by Lottie's friend. He'd never felt entirely comfortable mentioning his mother, for fear of causing upset and bringing on one of his father's periodic melancholic moods. He'd felt he'd pushed the boundaries somewhat the previous day, when he'd suggested that Mama's clothes would be suitable for Lottie, but his father had surprised him by agreeing wholeheartedly. He watched a smile light up his father's face as he nodded in agreement to Miss Spencer's kind words.

'Yes, she was very gifted. I was blessed to have known her. But I no longer repine at her loss.' Mr Crawford's eyes had a faraway look as he paused for a moment. 'I know she has gone to a better place. Why, I've got Nate now to keep me on my mettle... and two charming ladies to keep me company.'

It was good to see his father more like his old self, but Nate now steeled himself to mention his pressing concern. How would his father react and, more to the point, would Lottie agree? He'd not felt this nervous since his first battle charge.

He cleared his throat. 'Before we call for Ferrers to bring luncheon, there is something I feel I should discuss with you, Father, and you too, Lottie.' His voice came out louder than he'd intended, but it had got everyone's attention. Three pairs of eyes instantly locked on him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lottie's hands clasped in her lap, fingers rigidly interlocked. Poor girl, he desperately wanted to put his arm around her, tell her to leave everything to him. Instead, he decided to be brisk and matter of fact. That tactic had always worked with the men under his command. Give them facts and instruct them on how to proceed. Yes, that should do it.

'Father, I omitted to mention yesterday that it became expedient on the journey here for Miss Benham and me to claim to be a married couple, at the inn in Oxford.' He heard Lottie's deep intake of breath. His father merely arched an eyebrow, but for some reason didn't look at all discomposd.

Nate hurried on before anyone could interrupt. 'As it happened, we also ran into Mr Denby. You remember him, don't you, Father?'

His father rolled his eyes and grunted his affirmation. 'One might as well publish in the *Gazette*, as tell him something and expect him to be discreet.'

'Well, to get to the point, I've been giving it some thought and I have come to the conclusion that the only sensible solution to Lottie's ongoing problems with her cousin, is that she and I should get married. I certainly have no objection, and I hope you don't, Lottie. What do you say?'

He turned to see Lottie, whose face had turned white, staring at him open-mouthed. He formed the distinct impression that his proposal had not been received at all well.

It was his father who spoke first, breaking the awkward silence that had now settled on the room. 'Well, much as I approve of your choice of partner, I can't conceive of a more lacklustre proposal, Nate. I think you should be ashamed. Poor Miss Benham. I wouldn't blame her if she turned you down flat. What on earth were you thinking?'

Nate blinked in surprise and watched as his father stood up and offered his arm to Harriet, who had one hand over her mouth and her eyes fixed on Lottie's ashen face. 'Come, Miss Spencer,' his father said, 'let us leave my son and Miss Benham to converse alone for a while. I'll take you to the library, I've got some volumes there that I'm sure will interest you.' He turned again to his son. 'Nate, a piece of advice... Miss Benham is a sensitive and lovely young lady who I'd be delighted to have as a daughter-in-law. She is not one of your recruits.' With that, he left the room, an obviously troubled Harriet on his arm.



Well, that had not gone at all as he'd expected. He'd managed to upset everyone. Nate shifted closer to Lottie who remained immobile next to him. Only her hands, which were now working the fringe of her shawl, gave clear evidence of her agitated state. This wasn't looking good. How could he convince her that his offer was sincerely meant? Last night had decided things for him; he needed Lottie in his life. Perhaps honesty was the best policy.

'Lottie, look at me, please. I've made a complete mull of things, haven't I?' he ventured.

Slowly she turned her head. Her voice was so low he had to strain to hear her. 'You don't need to marry me, you know. We can think of another solution. I will leave with Harriet. If I hide somewhere remote, no-one will ever find me, and providing I evade Jonah until my birthday, everything will be fine.'

He cursed inwardly. How could he have frightened her off so thoroughly? He needed to take control of the situation. 'What nonsense. Besides, where would you go? No, my solution is the only answer.' Fear had compelled him to speak brusquely. He saw her mouth tighten. Lord, he was doing it again, wasn't he? Treating her like a common soldier. What had happened to his usual charm? He

used to be able to sweet-talk females into doing almost everything he wished. But they had not been the sort of female of Lottie's ilk, he reminded himself.

Trying again, he continued. 'I'm sorry. I'm not usually so clumsy. I mean you no disrespect. I would be honoured if you would consent to be my wife. I think we would do well together. We seem to share a lot of interests and...' A sudden thought sent a shiver up his spine. 'I'm not completely abhorrent, am I?' Well, he'd never had problems in the past in attracting willing ladies, but that was before he became a cripple. It was obvious his attractions had diminished, what with his nightmares and his damned leg.

'No, of course you're not. It's just that...' A frown crossed her face as she haltingly explained. 'I don't want you to feel obliged to offer for me... I know I'm no prize.' He had no idea what she meant; no prize indeed! She continued. 'I never meant for you to take on total responsibility for me and my problems. You were only supposed to help me reach Knowle, if you remember.' Her eyes were averted from his gaze, so he was unable to gauge her emotion.

He frowned. She was one of the loveliest and kindest young ladies he'd met in a long time. She was intelligent and resourceful. Who had caused her to think so little of herself? If he could get his hands on that person, and he was almost certain it was a he, he would set him right.

'Look at me,' he said, gently tipping her chin upwards, forcing her to look him in the eye. 'I'm not offering out of obligation. I truly think we could have a good future together. You've looked after me too, remember. What would I have done without your help last night?' He chuckled. 'I'd have been stranded on the floor until Jones came in to help me dress, that's what. What a pretty picture I would've made.'

What was he doing making a joke of things again? He needed to convince her. He wiped the smile from his face and became serious. His hands sought hers and clasped them. 'Please say you consent. I think we need each other.'

He swallowed. Would she understand? He did need her, decidedly more than she needed him. That night at the inn had been the first time he'd slept without being plagued by visions of blood and bodies. Somehow, knowing she was nearby had calmed him. He'd been in pain, but the torment in his mind had been eased. He hadn't dreaded falling asleep. There was something about her presence that soothed him.

Her eyes bored into his, as if trying to see his soul. He'd never felt so exposed. She blinked and took a breath as he held his, braced for her decision. Never had seconds felt so much like hours. 'Yes, Nate. I would be honoured to be your wife,' she whispered softly.

His lungs gulped for air as he took her in his arms and crushed her to him. Relief and elation... then searing pain.

'Goddamn!' The curse shot out of his mouth. He grimaced, abruptly withdrawing his arms from her now-rigid body in order to clutch at his leg. What a time for it to return. He'd been hungry to feel her body pressed against his – the

softness of her cheek nestled against his neck, the swell of her breasts against his chest, the faint scent of roses from her hair. Then red-hot pokers intervened, stabbing him, tearing him apart. Damn and damn again!

‘Oh, what have I done? I’m so sorry, Nate. Don’t feel obliged to kiss me. I don’t expect it. You must be careful, I don’t want to be the cause of pain for you.’ Despite the pain, her words registered. What was she talking about? Of course he wanted to kiss her. She had no idea what an effort it had been to act the gentleman and keep his hands off her in the carriage. His stomach gave a lurch. She must’ve had far higher expectations in terms of a husband, not a broken soldier, a cripple. He looked up and saw only concern in her eyes. Could there ever be a chance of her growing to love him? He’d do everything he could to get better, to care for her, and convince her that he was worth loving. Perhaps in time she would come to crave his kisses. He could only hope.



When they at last sought out his father and Harriet in the library, Nate was gratified to see his father give Lottie a crushing hug. ‘My dear, my dear, you don’t know what this means to me,’ the older man said, his voice filled with emotion. ‘I knew as soon as I saw you that you were someone special.’ Nate watched as his father drew a hand across his eye, surely not wiping away a tear? Then he turned to Nate and wagged an admonishing finger at him. ‘Now, Nate, I hope you will treat your betrothed with a little more sensitivity than you have shown so far. Indeed, I’m surprised she didn’t turn you down flat, my boy. What a way to go about things.’

Nate felt justifiably sheepish but managed to wink at Lottie all the same. Yes, it had been a near-run thing; he’d been unconscionably clumsy with his proposal, which was not like him at all. This time it was serious, and he’d just about ruined it... but thank God, she’d agreed. He was excited, filled with anticipation. For the first time in an age looking forward to life, not wishing to end it. He and Lottie were to be married.

His father slapped him on the back. ‘Well, this calls for a celebration. I’ll ring for Ferrers, get him to bring up a nice bottle of Veuve Clicquot. Have you tried it, Nate? I managed to obtain a case when you were away.’

‘What? There are free traders operating in the district?’ Nate’s eyes widened in shock; his father was a magistrate after all. Should be setting an example.

‘Not a bit of it. If there are, I’ve no notion of it.’ His father shrugged. ‘No, Simon sent it over, a whole crate, would you believe? Said he thought I needed cheering up. I have to say I’m getting quite a taste for it. I’m sure you ladies will enjoy it. It’s something quite special, just like you, my dear.’ He bowed to Lottie, who blushed.

Nate smiled. His uncle Simon was one of his father’s brothers. He lived in Liverpool, a large seaport on the northwest coast. Simon had rather a reputation in the family for being a bit wild, as did his sons. Nate was pretty sure the bottles had not had any duty paid on them. Nevertheless, he would not refuse to partake.



In short order, Ferrers brought a tray bearing four glasses and a large bottle. The loud pop as the cork shot out quite startled both Lottie and Harriet, neither lady having experienced champagne before. Mr Crawford smiled warmly as he brought two of the glasses over to them. ‘There, one for you, my dear. May I call you Lottie now, as you will soon be a daughter to me?’ He handed her a glass that seemed to be fizzing, bubbles continuously rising to the top and bursting. How on earth would she be able to drink it? Still feeling overcome with everything that had happened, she knew a glass of champagne was the least of her problems. ‘Yes, of course, I would be honoured for you to call me Lottie,’ she answered.

‘And you must call me Papa, my dear. Now, Miss Spencer, a glass for you. I’m sure you’ll like it. Just be careful, the bubbles have a tendency to go up one’s nose if one isn’t careful.’

Harriet took the proffered glass from Mr Crawford’s hand and examined it, a dubious expression on her face.

‘Take a sip, Miss Spencer, do. It really is quite delightful,’ he prompted. ‘Here, Nate, one for you, my boy.’ He took the final glass from the tray. ‘Now, let me propose a toast.’ Mr Crawford held up his glass. ‘To Nate and his beautiful soon-to-be bride, Lottie. Happiness and a long and healthy life, and hopefully, lots of grandchildren.’

Lottie saw Nate glance at her and felt herself colour with embarrassment. She heard him respond to his father’s toast. ‘To my lovely bride, who I promise to care for and cherish all my days. Good health, everyone.’

She took a cautious sip. Once one got over the strangeness of the bubbles

exploding on one's tongue, it was quite a pleasant drink. But how embarrassed she'd felt at Mr Crawford's mention of grandchildren. She'd agreed to marry Nate without even considering that side of things, and it was all going to happen in a very short space of time. She drew in a breath. Lord, she'd barely experienced a kiss. Never in fact. She dismissed Jonah's attempt at one as not constituting a proper experience. Surely kisses between a husband and wife would feel better than that. Wouldn't they?

'Lottie, you look very pensive, my dear. Not having second thoughts, are you?' Nate spoke, a smile on his face but concern in the piercing green eyes that searched her face.

'No, no, of course not,' she stuttered. 'It's all a little bit overwhelming. Everything in my life has changed so suddenly and in such a short space of time.' She smiled back at him in what she hoped was a convincing manner.

Harriet took her arm and guided her over to a seat near the window, away from the gentlemen, who were now discussing the finer qualities of the champagne.

'Sit down a moment, Lottie dear.' Harriet spoke quietly, leaning in so that her words would not be overheard. 'Lottie, are you happy with this arrangement? You don't have to marry if you don't wish to. You and I can travel somewhere where your cousin cannot find us. I have a little money, and I'm sure I could support us for a time until you turn twenty-five.'

How unselfish her friend was, and what a generous gesture. Lottie was moved. But she had to refuse. 'Oh, no, don't think that I'm unhappy, Harriet. I couldn't think of a better man than Major Crawford to spend my life with. I just hope he will not be disappointed in me. I'm... I'm so unsophisticated, and not like the ladies I'm sure he is acquainted with in London.'

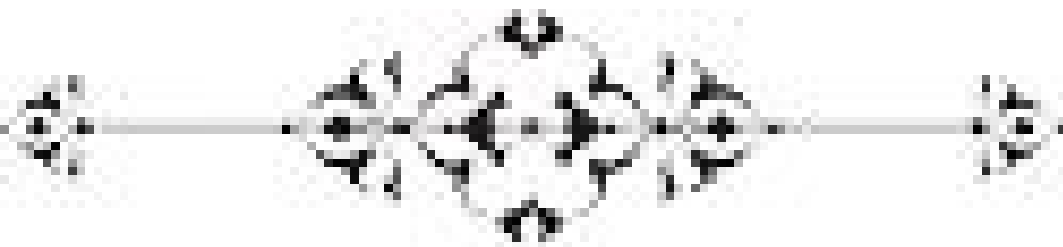
'Nonsense, my dear. I've never seen a man look more besotted than he does when he looks at you. He's lucky to have you.' Lottie listened, unconvinced, as her friend continued. 'You've coped admirably with all life has thrown at you. I just think you need a little more confidence in social situations, which sadly your father never permitted you to obtain, and you would be fit to be a duchess.'

Lottie had to giggle at her friend's comments. Harriet always had the knack of making her feel better. But she must be wrong about Nate loving her. He'd not mentioned love at all when he'd proposed, and indeed, they'd only known each other such a short time. How could they feel that deeply about each other so soon?

She glanced over to where he stood in conversation with his father. Tall and broad-shouldered, exuding energy, his figure was lean and muscular, testimony to his previously active life. Only by the fact that he leaned heavily on his cane could one tell that he had a problem with his leg. He seemed to sense her eyes on him and he turned to smile, briefly raising his glass in salutation. Her heart skipped a beat. Did he realise what an effect he had on her?



# Chapter 11



ALMOST A WEEK HAD passed since Lottie had agreed to marry Nate. She still couldn't quite believe it. A licence had been obtained from the Bishop of Worcester, and they would be married in three weeks' time.

Ensnconced in the library, Lottie was making a determined effort to concentrate on the volume in front of her. It was an edition of *Travels in Greece* by Richard Chandler, a fellow of Magdalen College. She recalled the man as being an acquaintance of her father's and was interested to know what he'd made of the journey to such a distant place. But try as she might, every so often her eyes would wander from the pages and settle on the view outside the window. Nate was in the courtyard garden, walking determinedly round the flower beds. He'd done the same thing every day for an hour each morning, adamant that he'd walk up the aisle without the use of his cane.

A commotion in the courtyard caught her attention. Craning her neck, she saw a large carriage had arrived. Four matched bays tossed their heads and pawed the ground as a liveried footman jumped down to take the lead reins. There was a crest on the door. She couldn't quite make out the details, but it looked suspiciously similar to the one on the duke's carriage that had conveyed her here. From her vantage point, she watched as Nate made his way over, his face wreathed in smiles. He disappeared out of view.

Burning with curiosity, she nevertheless remained in the library. No doubt Nate would send for her if it was indeed a message from the duke concerning her cousin. She didn't have long to wait. Some ten minutes later, the door to the library opened and Nate entered, accompanied by Francis Heslop.

'Here you are, Lottie. Look who's arrived.' Nate grinned as he ushered Francis towards her.

Mr Heslop was elegantly attired as usual, his blond hair contrasting with the dark blue of his immaculately cut coat. Even to her novice eyes, his clothes spoke of wealth and taste.

'How nice to see you again, Mr Heslop. What a pleasant surprise.' She was bursting to ask if he had any news but knew it would be most impolite.

'I'm pleased to see you too, Miss Benham, and you are looking so well. Your

sojourn here in Warwickshire seems to be agreeing with you.' He bowed, and as she took her proffered hand, he added with a smile, 'I also understand that I should wish you happy. Nate has just been telling me that you and he are to be married. That really is wonderful news. I congratulate you on choosing someone who will make an excellent husband. No-one of my acquaintance is more loyal, brave, and—'

'That's enough, Francis,' cut in Nate. 'Doing it a bit too brown. I'm sure Lottie knows enough about me and all my faults, without you putting me to the blush.'

Francis laughed. 'I'm reliably advised that ladies enjoy hearing their gentlemen praised. It helps them overlook their failings, and goodness knows, we all have failings, don't we?'

Lottie laughed. 'Well ladies have failings too, so I hope Nate is going to overlook mine.'

'Ah, but I haven't found any yet, my dear,' Nate whispered as he walked past her to the sideboard. 'A drink, Francis, after your journey? Would you like one too, my dear?' She managed to stutter out a 'no thank you', knowing her cheeks were burning at Nate's flirtatious words.

'Well, I hope it's a long, long time before either of you decides the other has faults,' said Francis, lifting his coat-tails to sit down in the chair next to Lottie. He crossed his legs with a graceful movement and peered over at the volume that she'd abandoned on the sofa.

'Ah, I see you're reading about Greece. My dear cousins Emma and Jamie recently returned from there. It was quite a miracle they arrived back in England unscathed.'

She swung her head round. 'Goodness. You mean very recently? While all Europe is in uproar?'

'Yes, Emma got herself and her brother home virtually on her own. She is quite a determined lady, blessed with a very loyal and generous spirit.' Francis' blue eyes blinked hard, and the real emotion behind the light-hearted façade he projected was evident. 'She recently married Nate's friend Richard, and I'm happy to say he too is now a friend of mine.'

Lottie rang for tea, and when it was served, Nate and Francis discussed the state of the country and the goings-on in town. Never having been to London, Lottie enjoyed listening to the latest news.

'The word is that His Majesty has been quite unsettled with this business of Burdett,' she heard Francis say.

'You mean all the commotion on Piccadilly about his possible arrest?' replied Nate. 'The mob doesn't want him to be sent to the Tower.' Nate had shared with her the news in the broadsheets, accounts that told of Piccadilly being lit up with torches, bonfires, and the like. It was a wonder nothing had been destroyed.

'Oh, if he goes, he won't be there long. It's all just for show, you can be sure. The trick is not to incite the mob. There are too many who would like to see the same here as has occurred in France.' Francis set his cup down and leaned

forward confidentially. 'Wheatley is certain that the mob is being manipulated, he's sure there is another ring of French sympathisers operating in the country.'

'No. That's terrible,' answered Nate. 'I know times are hard for many people, but does he really believe there would be revolution here?'

Lottie was shocked. The stories she'd heard as a young girl about the killings in France had terrified her at the time. The thought that such things might yet occur in her own beloved land sent shivers down her spine. Surely there weren't English people conspiring for this to happen?

Francis must have noted her shock. 'Not revolution, and not imminently, so do not fear, Miss Benham,' he reassured her. 'But Wheatley is involved in ensuring that England's enemies do not succeed in their plans to invade. Inciting trouble here is one of the methods Napoleon's agents use to aid their cause, I'm afraid. In fact, information about a suspected agent is what brought us away from London. That's how we came to be at Oxford and meet you when we did.'

What a timely coincidence that had been, she thought.

The talk then moved on to events in the Peninsula, a subject that she guessed was both interesting and painful to Nate. According to Francis, Viscount Wellington and his army were in a nigh-on impregnable position in Portugal. If necessary, his troops could be evacuated easily by sea from Lisbon, and he was employing his engineers to build fortifications across the neck of the isthmus where his army lay, the better to defend it from encroachments by the enemy.

'Yes, you can be sure the Beau knows what he is about, Francis. I was on his personal staff and never ceased to be amazed with how much he concerned himself with the details. Kept us all on our toes.' Nate chuckled ruefully.

Francis leaned back in his chair. 'We must apologise for boring you with our conversation, Miss Benham.'

'Not at all, I'm very concerned about how the war is going. It affects us all in one way or another, does it not?' She thought of her cousin Ned, who'd given his life to no purpose in the cursed war.

'Indeed.' Francis nodded. 'Nevertheless, we will talk of something else. I expect you're wondering why I'm really here.'

'Well, now you mention it, Francis,' answered Nate, 'I did think you'd come rather a long way just for a chat about the state of the government and the war.'

Francis acknowledged his friend's pointed comment with a roll of his eyes. 'I come with an invitation from Wheatley. He requests that you and Miss Benham return with me and stay for a day or two. I believe he has some information.'

Lottie saw Nate was frowning. 'You look puzzled, Nate?'

'No, just thinking. What a kind invitation and... hmm, unexpected. He could have sent the information with you, couldn't he Francis?' She would swear there was suspicion in Nate's eyes, but he continued with a smile. 'Of course we'd be delighted to accept.'

Francis shrugged. 'I'm usually privy to everything Wheatley knows, but in this instance he did not share it with me.' Lottie formed the distinct impression that

Nate did not believe the duke's invitation was motivated purely by kindness. She, too, wondered why such an elevated personage would require their company.

Francis addressed her. 'Wheatley's sister is in residence at the moment, so you need have no fear that you will be staying in a male-only household, Miss Benham. Lady Elizabeth Ovens has recently finished her schooling and has just returned from Bath. His Grace would be most pleased for you to make her acquaintance.'

Lottie quaked inwardly. A duke's sister – what on earth would they have in common? She looked to Nate for reassurance and he nodded, so she smiled and answered, 'That would be a great honour, Mr Heslop. I'm delighted to accept the duke's kind invitation.'

'Excellent.' Francis clapped his hands. 'Now, I do believe you should call me Francis. I regard Nate almost as a brother, so, as you two are to be wed, surely it does not break any rule for you to call me by my first name?' He flashed a look at Nate who was now standing behind Lottie, his hand on her shoulder. 'That is, if you agree, Nate?'

'Why should I object, Francis? Lottie is free to make up her own mind as to whether she wishes to regard you as a brother.'

Lottie giggled and cast a brief glance up at Nate. Why was he acting so possessively? Surely he could tell that Francis did not look on her as anything other than a sister? She'd certainly not picked up on any amorous tones from him, either here or when she'd been on her own with him, albeit briefly, at the inn in Oxford.

'Of course I would be delighted to call you Francis, and you must call me Lottie. I always wanted a brother. My cousin Ned was something of a brother to me. But I saw so little of him.'

Nate's hand on her shoulder relaxed and his fingers briefly stroked the back of her neck before withdrawing completely. Shivers of warmth raced up her spine, transporting her back to the night she'd cradled him in her arms as he lay on the floor of his room.

Her pleasant reminiscence was interrupted by Nate's words. 'Sorry, Francis, would you repeat that? I'm afraid I was distracted.' It seemed she wasn't the only one who wasn't paying attention to their guest.

'I was just telling Lottie she must be sure to request Wheatley's permission for a tour of the library at Begley Hall. He's quite a connoisseur of ancient Greek texts and has a fine collection of manuscripts. You'd be interested too, wouldn't you? As I recall, you got a double first in classics.'

'That's right, though I fear I've forgotten much. Life on the Peninsula wasn't very conducive to study, and the Beau didn't let us have too much free time.' Nate's laugh sounded hollow. 'We'd both be very interested to see Wheatley's collection, if he would permit, wouldn't we Lottie? Father told me how much you were able to assist your father with his Greek texts.'

So that was why Mr Crawford had been delighted when she'd told him about

her scholarly work, concluded Lottie; he knew it was something that she and Nate would have in common. 'I'd very much enjoy spending time in the duke's library,' she admitted, 'but don't be reticent, Nate. Your own collection here at Willow End is quite impressive. In fact, I spotted at least one volume that was not in Father's collection.'

'That must be the *Plato Protagoras* you mean?' Nate sucked in his cheeks. 'Cost me a pretty penny.'

'Yes, that's the one; where he says, "Man is the measure of all things".'

'My, my, you are well read.' Nate's eyes held an approving gleam. 'I can see we'll be spending some very interesting evenings.'

She caught the suggestion of something... she was not quite sure what, in his words. 'Well, Plato's works were Father's speciality. I have even seen a copy which is said to be the oldest existing Plato text – it belonged to one of Father's friends, and I believe he sold it to the Bodleian eventually.'

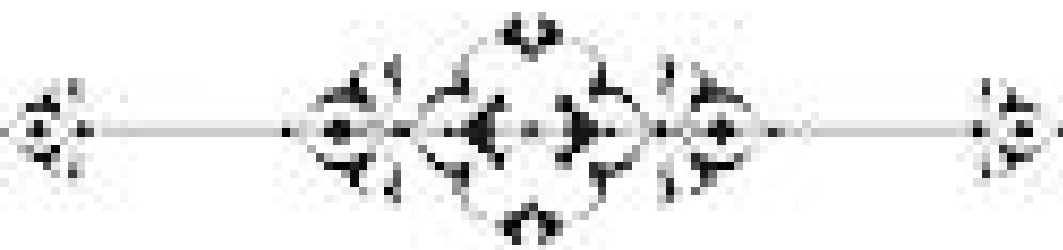
There was now something like awe in Nate's gaze. What had she said to provoke that reaction?

'Nate, you look like you've just been landed a facer,' chortled Francis.

'What? No, not at all... I hadn't quite realised what a treasure I have in Lottie.' Lottie felt herself blushing and was relieved when Francis drew their attention to the arrival of Mr Crawford in the courtyard below. 'I thought I heard something. Looks like your father has returned, Nate. Do you think he'd have any objections to me staying here for the night?'

'Good grief, no. He'll be so pleased to see you, you'd be lucky to get away if you wanted to. Let's go down to greet him.' He crooked his arm for Lottie to take. She was still a little dazed by his fulsome words. Did he really mean them? She glanced up at his face and was almost overcome by the smouldering intensity of his gaze. He gave her arm a squeeze. 'Come, let's go and greet Father.'

# Chapter 12



THE NEXT DAY FOUND Nate and Lottie in the duke's coach heading towards Begley Hall. Nate had persuaded Francis to ride Max – now safely returned to Willow End – as the horse was sorely in need of exercise. Francis didn't require much persuasion, being an excellent judge of good horseflesh and only too happy to oblige his friend.

Every so often Nate would lean his head out the window, ostensibly to speak to Francis, but Lottie suspected it was really to check on his favourite steed. He'd been down to the stables every day over the course of the last week to groom the stallion and take him treats. It comforted her to know that it would surely not be long before he was recovered sufficiently to ride again. Thanks to his dogged determination in performing his exercises, his leg was improving.

She looked up from her copy of *La Belle Assemblée*; it was not her imagination, the coach really was slowing.

'Looks like we're nearly there,' said Nate, confirming her thoughts. Her insides began to quake. Although she'd met the duke previously, that had taken place in the more normal surroundings of an inn. Now she was to meet him at his ancestral seat and she was certain to be overawed by the undoubted magnificence she would find.

The coach passed through the pillared gates to the ducal estate and rolled up a very long drive towards the house. Glimpses of the imposing façade could be seen before the whole came into view. She gasped when it did. It was immense. She ceased trying to count the number of windows once she reached thirty. Goodness, how many rooms did it contain? The coach drew to a halt, and Francis trotted up to where she was peeking from the coach window.

'Isn't it magnificent? It takes my breath away every time I arrive.' He grinned at Nate. 'I'll just see Max settled. Don't worry, Wheatley's stable hands are the best, he'll come to no harm.' With a wave of his hand, Francis turned his steed and cantered off.

'I expect he's also going to alert Wheatley of our arrival,' laughed Nate.

Lottie peered up at the house again and forgot what she was going to say; she now had more pressing concerns.

‘Do I... do I look respectable enough to meet a duke?’ Her hands were shaking as she fastened the ribbons of her hat beneath her chin.

‘Just a moment, let me.’ He brushed her fingers aside and retied the ribbons, this time to one side. ‘There, perfect. You’re fit to meet His Majesty himself, and he would be a lucky man indeed.’ His green eyes bored into hers, and she felt her stomach somersault at the intensity of his stare. She didn’t believe his flattery, but he did bolster her nerves. She smiled back up at him. Armed with new courage, she was almost ready to renew her acquaintance with the duke.

At last the coach rolled to a stop, the door opened, and the steps were let down. Two sets of impressive stone stairs led up to the main entrance. Beneath them, a covered portico gave visitors arriving in inclement weather protection during the short journey from coach to house. Nate stepped down onto the cobbled surface and held Lottie’s hand as she descended. The main doorway opened and a servant, dressed in an immaculate black coat and matching breeches, bowed them in.

‘Welcome, sir, mistress. Let me show you to the drawing room. His Grace has been apprised of your arrival.’

Nate handed over his hat and the greatcoat draped over his arm. Lottie removed her pelisse and hat, smoothed down her skirts, and tugged her gloves into place. Slowly, they ascended the stairs to the magnificent formal hallway, all marble and mirrors and antique statuary. Then up another flight of stairs, to the duke’s private quarters. The walk seemed to take an age, not entirely due to Nate’s steady pace. The place was enormous. Lottie wondered how anyone did not lose themselves. Were the staff issued with maps?

At last the butler halted in front of an impressive set of double doors and opened them wide, announcing their arrival in stentorian tones. ‘Major Nathaniel Crawford and Miss Charlotte Benham, Your Grace.’

‘Thank you, Sutton. Have tea sent up and let Lady Elizabeth know our visitors have arrived,’ a familiar voice drawled from a corner of the room. ‘Forgive me, Major Crawford, Miss Benham. I’m just finishing something, I’ll be with you in a moment. Please do be seated.’

Lottie looked over to the corner from where the voice had emanated. Wheatley was seated at a small escritoire, a sheaf of papers in his hand. He was leaning back in his chair, his legs outstretched beneath the ornate table. He slowly turned over the page he was reading, then folded them all together and inserted them into a green leather folder.

He looked up. ‘There, all done. If I don’t make a point of reading all the estate reports as they come in, they tend to pile up, so I discipline myself to set aside time to go through them. Unfortunately, I miscalculated the time it would take to decipher my Leicestershire man’s handwriting. Usually Francis goes through them first and does all the hard work.’

He stood up and sauntered towards them, an enigmatic smile on his face. Lottie was again reminded of a cat – all feline grace, but possibly with hidden

claws.

‘Welcome to my home, Miss Benham.’ He stretched out a languid hand as she rose from her curtsy, his silver-grey eyes raking over her. His scrutiny provoked a feeling of discomfort; would she be found wanting? ‘You look a little less harassed, Miss Benham,’ he drawled. ‘May I assume that Major Crawford has been taking good care of you?’

She instinctively knew the duke’s sardonic tone was irritating Nate; his arm had gone tense under her hand and his knuckles showed white where they gripped his cane. Before she could respond, she heard a familiar voice behind her.

‘He’s been taking very good care of her, Wheatley.’ It was Francis. ‘Nate and Miss Benham are to be married shortly. That is good news, is it not?’

The transformation was instantaneous. Wheatley’s languid expression vanished, to be replaced by a genuine smile of pleasure as he looked over her shoulder to greet his secretary. ‘Francis, I’ve missed you. I don’t know how you manage to read those reports from Mason. They might as well be written in hieroglyphs for all the sense I could make of them.’ He strode past Nate and Lottie to clap Francis on the back and muttered something that made Francis smile.

The two men came over to join Nate and Lottie, who had been left feeling a little like intruders.

‘Sit down, do,’ ordered the duke, gesturing them to a seat. ‘Congratulations, Major Crawford, Miss Benham. I wish you both happy. When is your marriage to take place?’ Wheatley settled on a small sofa facing the matching one on which Lottie had perched. The rich damask of the covers made the material of her dress look quite shabby.

Nate answered for them both. ‘In just under three weeks’ time, Your Grace. I obtained a licence. We both thought calling the banns would be a little too much like tempting fate if Miss Benham’s cousin is sniffing around for her.’

‘Quite so, quite so,’ interrupted Wheatley. ‘But after the wedding – have you given any thought to a bridal trip?’

She felt Nate stir, and wondered what the duke’s purpose was in asking such a personal question. He seemed determined to goad a reaction. Nate took one of her hands – she’d been gripping them together in her lap as if her life depended on it. ‘No, I’m afraid I haven’t,’ he admitted. Lottie saw the rueful smile on his lips as he turned towards her and the unsettling glint in his eyes that made her insides quiver. ‘Where would you like to go, Lottie?’

Before she could gather her thoughts to answer, the duke broke in. ‘I have the very idea.’ Lottie saw Francis shoot Wheatley a questioning look at these words, but his employer ignored all their stunned faces and continued to elucidate. ‘As a wedding gift from me, I insist you spend at least a couple of weeks at my property in Cumbria. The house itself is very fine, but it’s also secluded, so if you wish to keep apart from company... and I’m persuaded that that’s what people on



bridal trips do wish... His voice trailed off and his face held a smug smile.

She heard Nate clear his throat, a sign that he was unsettled or angry – possibly both. ‘That’s very generous of you, Your Grace, but I really couldn’t.’

He was cut off by Wheatley. ‘Nonsense, I insist. Miss Benham has been through a lot. I’m sure she would enjoy discovering the countryside that certain of our poets speak so highly of.’ Lottie became aware that Wheatley’s hooded eyes were observing her. ‘What do you say, Miss Benham? I believe I’ve barely heard one word escape your lips since you arrived.’

She took a breath. ‘You’re very generous, Your Grace, but I agree with the major. We couldn’t possibly accept.’ Was she really refusing a duke? And why was he so insistent?

To Lottie’s surprise, and Nate’s too, it seemed, Francis added his voice to Wheatley’s. ‘You are a stubborn pair. You’re well suited indeed. A trip will do you good, Nate, and it will remove you both from Jonah’s orbit. You don’t want to deal with any unpleasantness from him so soon after marrying. Besides, if it makes you feel any better, Nate, you’re welcome to make an inspection of the estate and let me know if anything is amiss. The bailiff there has been sending in his monthly reports late each time. I had planned to visit myself to check, but if you go, it will save me a journey.’

Wheatley arched his eyebrow at these words but remained silent, apparently engrossed in examining his perfectly manicured fingernails. Nate, who was still regarding the duke through narrowed eyes, answered Francis. ‘Well, if you’re sure I could be of assistance...’

‘That’s settled then.’ Wheatley slapped his thigh and stood up, a satisfied smile on his face. ‘Let me know the date of the wedding. Francis and I would be delighted for an invitation by the way, and I will arrange for my travelling coach to be at your disposal. Ah, here’s tea.’ He gestured to Lottie. ‘Miss Benham, as my sister has not yet seen fit to grace us with her presence, would you please do the honours and pour?’

Lottie managed to still her shaking hand sufficiently to pour three cups of tea. She was still in shock at the duke’s request, or rather demand, for a wedding invitation and the offer of his property in Cumbria. And he’d seemed very pleased to have his way, for what reason she could not fathom. Perhaps, being a duke, he was accustomed to his will always prevailing. Lottie glanced at Nate; he was tense, she could tell by the set of his shoulders. He was chatting easily with Francis, but his eyes kept returning to Wheatley.

As Lottie was about to pour her own cup, a door to the side of the fireplace, skilfully disguised as panelling, swung open and a vision of loveliness walked in. Wheatley’s young sister was blonde and petite. Her dress, simple though it was, was surely made by a seamstress at the height of her powers, it was so beautifully cut. Lottie felt thoroughly drab by comparison.

‘I’m so sorry I’m late,’ the vision announced. ‘I was out riding, and it took an age to get back, as Millie cast a shoe. Wheatley, are you going to introduce me?’

Her voice had a warm melodious tone. She cast the duke a demure look, though her eyes sparkled, a fact that apparently was not lost on her brother.

‘I rather think you’ve been delayed because you couldn’t decide which dress to wear. Am I correct or not?’ Wheatley chuckled, a warm sound that made him seem almost human. So, he had a softness for his sister, thought Lottie, a softness kept well hidden by a normally austere and autocratic demeanour. Lottie began to relax a little; perhaps he wasn’t quite the dangerous man he appeared to most people.

‘Well, yes, I suppose I did try on one or two before deciding on this one,’ giggled the young lady, looking not the least bit repentant. Lottie couldn’t help warming to her.

‘Elizabeth, my dear, may I introduce Major Nate Crawford and his betrothed, Miss Charlotte Benham. Major Crawford, Miss Benham, this is my sister, Lady Elizabeth Ovens.’

Lottie made a graceful curtsy and Nate bowed.

‘It’s an honour to meet you, Lady Elizabeth.’

‘I’m pleased to make your acquaintance too.’ She favoured them both with a bright smile. ‘It’s nice to have visitors for a change. My brother is notoriously reclusive, you know. I was quite reconciled to being bored here in the country until he is ready to take me to London. It will be lovely to spend time with someone of my own sex. Hopefully we share similar interests, Miss Benham?’

‘I expect Miss Benham has more in her head than the latest fashions and hairstyles, Elizabeth, so you may be disappointed,’ drawled Wheatley.

His sister wrinkled her nose at her brother’s words and sat down with a bounce next to Lottie. ‘You see how he regards me? He thinks all I understand is frivolities. You know I’m more intelligent than that, don’t you, Mr Heslop?’

‘Er, well, yes of course you are, Lady Elizabeth,’ replied Francis, shifting in his seat.

Wheatley put a hand out and touched his friend’s arm. ‘Don’t be drawn in, Francis. She’s just trying to provoke me because I have refused to rush down to London the minute she returned from Bath.’ He shook his head at his sister and added, ‘Give me a week or two, my dear. I’ve business to attend to here. I’ve promised to introduce you to society this season, and I will. Just have a little patience. Now, Miss Benham is shortly to be married. Perhaps you and she would like to spend some time together. You have all the latest fashion periodicals to peruse. Or if you prefer, show her round the gardens.’ His intention to remove both females from the room could not have been more obvious.

Lottie was just about to say that she would be happy to go to her room to rest, not wanting to burden herself on the vibrant young lady next to her, when Lady Elizabeth grabbed her arm. ‘That’s a splendid idea. Come with me, I’ll show you to your room, then if you wish we can tour the grounds.’

‘If you’re sure you don’t mind? I am happy to rest in my room if you don’t require company.’

'Nonsense. I've been on my own for over a week now. Much as I love my brother and esteem Mr Heslop, well, they're men and only wish to talk estate business and suchlike and don't wish to include me. I daresay they think it will overtax my female brain.' She laughed over her shoulder at the gentlemen as she led Lottie out of the room. Lottie's last glimpse of Nate was the encouraging smile he sent her as she turned briefly before disappearing out of the door.

Once outside, Lottie was taken along corridors and around corners until she was quite lost. Finally, Lady Elizabeth opened a polished oak door and they entered one of the loveliest bedchambers that Lottie had ever seen. The walls were lined in red and gold patterned silk, and a large four-poster bed, hung with matching fabric, dominated the room. A white marble fireplace to one side of the door faced the large window, which looked across an expansive area of lawn. Lottie was speechless; it was far too grand for her.

Diplomatically ignoring her guest's silence, Lady Elizabeth pointed to a second doorway on the same wall as the bed. 'That's a dressing room and water closet. Wheatley had the latest plumbing installed for all the principal bedchambers. He's quite modern for someone so old.' She sat down with a thud onto the bed and took in Lottie's dazed countenance, shrewdly observing, 'You look a bit surprised, Miss Benham.'

'Yes, I suppose I am a bit overawed, Lady Elizabeth. My own family house is not as grand as this.'

Lottie wandered round the room, taking in the ornate plasterwork of the ceiling and cornices and reverently touching the silken curtains that draped the bedposts. How soft and luxurious they felt against her skin. She saw her bags had been brought up and unpacked. Her new hairbrush and matching hand mirror, an early wedding gift from Nate's father, were placed on the armoire, ready for her use.


She turned as Lady Elizabeth spoke. 'Please call me Elizabeth. May I call you Charlotte? I hate being thought stuffy and stiff-necked, just because I'm the daughter and sister of a duke.'

Lottie swept her eyes over to the young lady, who was now leaning back on her elbows, her legs stretched out before her, ostensibly examining her shoes. Her eyes momentarily caught Lottie's and behind them Lottie saw the vulnerable and possibly lonely girl that the duke's sister really was.

Lottie's nerves settled, and she abandoned her reserve. 'I would be honoured to call you Elizabeth. But please call me Lottie, I hate the name Charlotte. Only my cousin calls me by that name and he is no favourite of mine.'

Elizabeth's face broke into a smile, her eyes twinkling again. 'Ah, do I sense a tale there, Lottie? What has your cousin done to earn your disapproval? Perhaps you'll tell me later when we are more comfortable with each other. Come, let us go down to the gardens while the sun is shining. I expect the gentlemen will be discussing business until it is time to change for dinner.' In one swift movement, she leapt off the bed and, grasping a startled Lottie's arm, made for the door.

Laughing at her companion's exuberance, Lottie followed her out.



Lottie had been concerned about being separated from Nate, but with the company of Elizabeth, who it turned out was not the frivolous, giddy girl that her brother had implied, she enjoyed the hours spent in the garden. Elizabeth was intelligent and thoughtful, confessing that she enjoyed time spent in the library and was quite conversant with the business of running a large estate. Her mother, the late duke's second wife, had died when she was born. The late duke had waited several years since the death of his first wife before remarrying, hence the large age gap between herself and her half-brother.

‘To be honest, Wheatley has been more like a father to me. Our father died when I was five years old, and Wheatley took it upon himself to care for me, even though he had all the burdens of the dukedom thrust upon him. He arranged for tutors and governesses and ensured that my education equalled that of any younger son. Inevitably, in later years I saw little of him. I heard a lot of rumours, of course, about his disreputable lifestyle, but he made sure I didn't suffer for them.’

At Lottie's surprised look, Elizabeth elaborated. ‘Oh, even in the select company in which I lived in Bath, I heard rumours. Several of my so-called female friends, who had older brothers, took great delight in telling me what they had learned. I often think young ladies can be quite cruel, more so than young men sometimes, don't you think? Males come to fisticuffs and then it is all over and they are fast friends again. Girls are much more subtle, and it can last for years.’

Lottie, who had no real experience of either schooling or mixing much in society, sensed her companion's pain. ‘I'm afraid I never did have many female friends, Elizabeth. After my mother died, my only companion was my dear governess and friend, Harriet. She departed four years ago – when I was twenty – to care for her sister, and I was left on my own to look after the household and my father. He did not approve of me going out in company, so I suppose I have led a very secluded life really.’

‘Then how did you meet Major Crawford? He is a very arresting-looking gentleman with his brooding dark looks and his piercing green eyes. There must be some tale of romance there, surely?’ Elizabeth smiled roguishly.

Lottie thought for a moment. Should she tell the whole sorry tale? She looked at Elizabeth's open face, her grey eyes so like her brother's. Well, he knew the whole of it, so would it make any difference?

'Come, it is a long story. We'll sit down over here, and I'll tell you all and you'll see what a mull I have made of things.'

She took Lady Elizabeth's arm and made for one of the ornate wrought-iron benches that were placed around the Italian garden in which they now found themselves. Elizabeth sat down next to her. In a gesture of sympathy, she took one of Lottie's hands in her own. 'I'm sure things aren't as bad as all that, and if they are, well, I'd be happy to help you and I'm sure my brother will as well.'

'Your brother has already been of great help, Elizabeth. Without the help of Major Crawford, His Grace, and Mr Heslop, I would surely be in dire straits by now.'

Taking a deep breath, Lottie recounted her story. As her tale unfolded, an expression of shock and horror appeared on Elizabeth's countenance and she clutched Lottie's hand. 'How awful of your cousin. He sounds to be a complete scoundrel,' she gasped, her eyes wide. 'You did the right thing to run away. How lucky you were to fall into Major Crawford's path. Why, it sounds to me like you both need each other. I noticed the warm looks he keeps sending your way. And I disagree with your assessment of the reasons for his proposal. I'm sure his motives were much more than just the necessity to hide you, my dear. It's plain for anyone to see that he loves you.'

Lottie blushed, positive that Elizabeth had it all wrong. 'I'm sure you're mistaken. Major Crawford is a gentleman and feels a gentleman's honour to keep me from danger, that's all.'

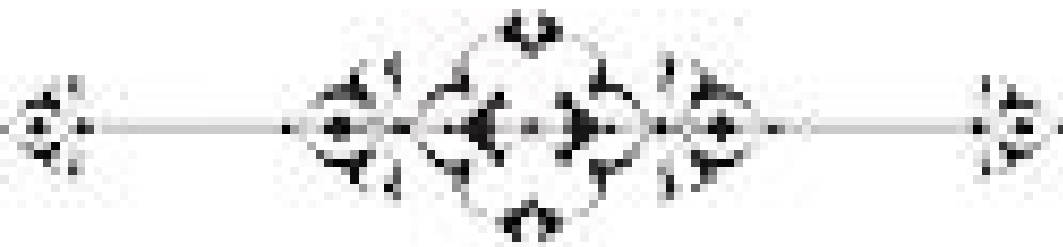
'Have it your way, then.' Elizabeth regarded Lottie from beneath her lashes and a smile curled on her lips. 'But I'm sure there are less troublesome ways for him to keep you safe, other than marrying you. I may be younger than you, but I've mixed a little in society in Bath and believe me, gentlemen don't generally wish to rush into marriage, not unless it is to their great advantage. From what you say, he doesn't need your inheritance. Also, he is personable and attractive, so he must have had his pick of the ladies. But he has chosen you, my dear, so I think you undervalue yourself when you say he offered out of obligation.'

Slightly reassured, but not entirely convinced by Elizabeth's words, Lottie shrugged and smiled. 'Well, whatever his reasons, I intend to do all in my power to make him happy.'

Elizabeth's eyes twinkled as she smoothed the creases from her skirts and took Lottie's arm again. 'Come, let me take you back to your room. It must be nearly time to change for dinner. I'll arrange for one of the maids to assist you.' Lottie's face must have shown her alarm for Elizabeth added, 'Don't worry, we will not be dining in the state dining room. It will be quite informal, you know. Mr Sutton will send one of the footmen to escort you to the drawing room before we go into dinner.'

Feeling only slightly reassured, Lottie took her arm, and the two young women turned their steps back to the house.

# Chapter 13



LOTTIE ENTERED THE DRAWING room, having spent an inordinate amount of time checking her appearance before being satisfied that she would not be an embarrassment to Nate. The mantua-maker Nate had brought from Solihull had done a very competent job of making her several new dresses, and also altering those of the late Mrs Crawford, which now fitted her perfectly. For this evening, she had chosen to wear a dark blue silk chemise gown, simply adorned with embroidery in a lighter blue hue across the sleeves and at the hem. She carried an embroidered shawl in different shades of blue and yellow around her shoulders.

She was the last to arrive and found the others grouped at one end of the large, beautifully appointed drawing room. Lady Elizabeth was chatting animatedly to Francis while the duke was pointing out something of interest on a large globe of the world to Nate, who seemed to tower over him. They were both of equal height, but it struck Lottie that Nate's physique reflected the fact that his was an active life – or had been until his unfortunate encounter with a French musket ball. Dressed in his evening clothes, he was the picture of elegant masculinity. Tall and commanding, she thought a stranger might be forgiven for mistaking him for the duke. He must have noted her arrival, for he immediately excused himself and came to greet her.

‘You look very lovely this evening,’ he said, taking her hand. He leaned closer and murmured for her ears alone, ‘How are you bearing up? I noticed you walking round the garden earlier with Lady Elizabeth, you seemed to be getting on well with each other.’ He tucked her hand round his arm as he smiled down at her, his green eyes twinkling. She was aware of the muscles beneath his sleeve, and the look in his eyes made her pulse race. Was that the look that Elizabeth had referred to?

Somehow, she managed to answer. ‘Yes, my nerves are quite settled, thank you. Lady Elizabeth is a lovely young lady, she’s been very kind and welcoming. What about you? Have you learned any further news of my cousin?’

His eyes, which had been focussed entirely on her with an intensity that sent the blood rushing to her cheeks, suddenly became guarded and he looked away.

'I've been made very welcome too,' he answered. 'Wheatley has some news of your cousin, but I'll save that for later. Nothing to worry about. Let's enjoy the evening. I understand His Grace will be happy to show us his library after the meal, which should be a treat for both of us.' He smiled again before leading her off to join the others. But she couldn't help noticing how he'd deftly turned the subject from her cousin. What had been learnt?



The evening passed in a haze of wonderful dishes, fine wines, and finally brandy and tea served in the library at the duke's behest.

'I thought it would be pleasant to finish off in here,' said Wheatley, leading them into an opulent room lined with bookcases and dotted about with sofas, chairs, and occasional tables. 'I will show you my recently acquired manuscripts, but first, Elizabeth, if you please, would you care to play something soothing for my aged ears?' He pointed to the large pianoforte placed halfway down the vast room.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, but a smile crept onto her lips all the same. 'Of course I will... hmm, something soothing?' She gestured to Francis. 'Mr Heslop, please would you help me choose something suitable?'

Francis strolled over to help Lady Elizabeth make a choice from the duke's impressive collection of sheet music. They found something that they both agreed would suit, and soon the room was filled with the sounds of Elizabeth's accomplished playing.

'How very sentimental of you. Irish melodies rather than Mozart, my dear?' drawled Wheatley when his sister finished playing some time later and everyone had expressed their appreciation and started to wander around the impressive room.

'Well, I thought it would make a nice change. I was forced to practice such sombre pieces for a long time,' Lady Elizabeth sighed. 'It's nice to be able to play something lighter. Besides,' she added with a giggle, 'the sentiments expressed are quite lovely. I particularly like that last piece. I understand the composer wrote it for his wife. I'd be delighted to have someone write a song for me. What do you say, Lottie?'

Lottie was examining the large volume she had spotted earlier. It was on a stand so that it could be perused with ease, and it looked very heavy. She looked



name distractedly at the sound of her name. 'I'm sorry, please would you repeat that, Elizabeth? I'm afraid I was rather engrossed in this wonderful book. The drawings are quite astonishing.' She left the book on its stand and went over to where Elizabeth was seated near the fireplace.

'I was just explaining to my brother how nice it would be to have a song written for oneself. By someone whom one cared for, of course.' Elizabeth sighed theatrically and fluttered her eyelashes.

'Well, I shall ensure all your prospective suitors are qualified to write you charming songs before being allowed to approach you, my dear, along with all the other qualities I would expect, of course,' pronounced the duke.

'Now you're being facetious, my dear brother. I only said it would be nice. I didn't mean I would expect it,' laughed Elizabeth. 'Now, what do you say, Lottie?'

There was a pause before Lottie spoke. 'I suppose having a song written for one might be considered a nice thing. However, I would like to think that any sentiments expressed, besides being sincere of course, were better kept private.'

Nate had been listening to the exchange between the duke and his sister and had seen Lottie's cheeks flush when she was pulled into their badinage. He decided to help her out. 'Well said, my dear. You may rest assured I will therefore not be composing any songs for you,' he smiled. 'Not that you don't deserve a paean to your character and beauty, but because you do not wish it.'

'More likely, Nate, that you do not have a talent for it,' laughed Francis from across the room, where he was replacing the sheet music into neat piles. 'I remember how tuneless you were at school.'

'Tis true,' grinned Nate. 'I'm quite a hopeless case when it comes to singing and poetry.'

Nate had been unable to take his eyes off Lottie from the moment she had joined them downstairs. He hoped he had been subtle enough for no-one to have noticed. For some reason, his eyes were drawn to her like moths to a flame. He'd watched as she'd listened to Elizabeth's playing, a rapt expression on her face. The music over, his eyes had followed as she wandered round the impressive room, occasionally lifting a volume from the shelves to peek at the title page. Her attention had then been transfixed on the volume laid out on its own stand. He'd enjoyed watching her changes of expression as she'd turned the pages. He would never tire of gazing at her. How he longed for them to be alone together in their own home.

He felt a dig in his ribs and turned to see Francis, his task with the sheets completed, seated beside him, his eyes gleaming with barely concealed amusement. 'What are you thinking about with that smile on your face? Or need I ask?' Francis whispered, masking his mouth with his hand. 'Your gaze has been fixed on your lovely betrothed all evening.' He gave a theatrical sigh. 'What it is to be in love.'

Nate shifted uncomfortably – had he been that obvious? He affected

nonchalance. 'Hmnm, if you say so.'

'You don't fool me, you know. It's plain that you're head over heels.' Francis wasn't giving up. 'I seem to recall you saying it would take a miracle for you to submit to the parson's mousetrap.' Francis chuckled. 'I rather think Miss Benham has truly worked a miracle.'

Before Nate could think of a suitable retort, the duke's voice rang out. 'Now we have all dined – most enjoyably, I hope – and have had some time to relax, I thought we should all be brought up to date with the news I received today.'

Nate saw Lottie's head whip round to where Wheatley stood, breaking her conversation with Elizabeth. The duke, the epitome of aristocratic languor, stood by the fireplace, the fingers of one hand negligently stroking the porcelain figure of a shepherdess, his other holding his glass of brandy. His silver-grey eyes roamed the room as if unaware of the effect his words had had on at least two of his guests.

Nate sat upright, his back rigid. What had Wheatley learnt since their conversation earlier that afternoon? He glanced over again at Lottie; her face was tense and the colour gone from her cheeks. He wished he could go over and hold her hand but knew it would only cause her embarrassment. His eyes widened as he saw Lady Elizabeth's hand creep forward to clasp Lottie's. So, Lottie had confided her troubles to her new friend. It would be good for her to have more female friends. He turned his attention back as Wheatley began to speak.

'You may be aware, Lottie... I hope you will permit me to call you that, now you are on first name terms with my dear sister?' Lottie bobbed her head in assent and Wheatley continued. 'You may be aware that I issued instructions for your cousin's movements to be monitored. From what you disclosed in Oxford, I thought it wise, both for your own safety and, it now seems, for the safety of the country, that he should be carefully watched.'

Nate heard Lottie's gasp and tried not to let his own mouth fall open in shock. What on earth did Wheatley mean? Surely the wretched Jonah was not involved in helping the French? He knew he was bad... but a traitor too?

Wheatley was speaking again. 'It appears that the War Office is aware that your cousin is involved in some sort of spy ring and are concerned in case he is alerted to the fact that he is under observation. They wish him to operate freely, thus enhancing the chances of snaring the ringleader. They have therefore warned me off.'

Wheatley took a sip from his glass, to all intents and purposes, and to Nate's growing anger, oblivious to Lottie's increasing distress. She was now twisting the fringe of her shawl quite violently.

'However,' Wheatley continued in his customary drawl, 'while I am more than willing to obey the instructions of Lord Liverpool in normal circumstances, in this, I fear, I have felt moved to ignore them. In fact, the man I have placed to watch your cousin is so ensconced in the vicinity it would be more suspicious to remove him.' He paused to take another sip.

Lottie broke the silence. 'Your Grace, does that mean you know where my cousin is? Does he know where I am?'

Wheatley's eyes flashed at her interruption and he held one finger up. Her cheeks reddened and her mouth clamped shut, but she continued to stare defiantly at the duke. Nate welled up with pride; it took courage to question a duke, and Lottie certainly had courage.

'I understand your wish to know everything, but I will tell you all I know at my own pace.' Wheatley's tone was icy. 'There's really no need for you to become agitated.'

'Oh really, Wheatley,' expostulated Elizabeth, shattering the growing tension. 'Can't you see the poor girl is beside herself with worry? Get to the point and tell her what she wants to know, if you please.'

Wheatley quirked a stern eyebrow at his sibling, but his expression softened, as if suddenly recalled to the fact that he was dealing with a young woman. 'I'm afraid my man is currently ignorant of your cousin's whereabouts. A situation which I trust will soon be rectified, or he will be seeking new employment.' Nate hoped the man would comply, and not only for his own sake. He needed to know Jonah's whereabouts in order to keep Lottie safe until they were wed.

Wheatley's next words reassured him somewhat. 'My man learned that your cousin was mystified by your disappearance, with no idea of where you had gone. It seems he'd given up any idea of trying to locate you after his initial inquiries failed and had settled back into his normal routine of drinking and... other pastimes.' Wheatley coughed, and his eyes met Nate's. He'd told Nate earlier about the whores Jonah had imported from London to entertain himself and his crony.

Lottie's eyes were still glued to Wheatley. Her shoulders had relaxed, so Nate knew that the duke's words had reassured her. He was just beginning to lose the tension in his own shoulders when Wheatley made his shattering announcement.

'However, it seems that a letter arrived a few days ago which galvanised Benham into action. He left abruptly, and unfortunately my man on the spot was unable to ascertain his destination. Discreet inquiries were made of the house staff, but it seems your cousin had not shared the details with anyone there, nor given any indication of when he was likely to return. His companion Basil Montgomery accompanied him. The other... mmm... guests who were staying in the house returned to London, so I think it is safe to assume he did not go there.'

'Oh no... no,' cried Lottie. She turned an anguished face to Nate. 'The letter, the letter, it must be the one that Harriet sent, inviting me to Knowle. Oh goodness, he only needs to make inquiries at the inn we stopped at and he'll know... he'll know where I am.' She slumped back down in her seat, head down, and started to sob, a sound that tore through him.

Nate disregarded the hot daggers of pain shooting through his leg and ran to kneel before her. It was not easy, but ignoring the agony, he enclosed both her hands in his. 'Lottie, listen to me. I'll not let him hurt you. You'll be safe with

me.' By God, he would kill any man who would harm her. He continued to soothe her, holding her hand and stroking her hair, until at last she stopped shaking and her breath settled into a more normal rhythm.

It was the duke's bored tones that brought them both back to the present. 'I hate to interrupt this touching scene.'

Nate turned his head and glared at Wheatley. The man's bland expression, giving no indication of awareness of the distress he'd caused, made Nate's blood boil. Couldn't the fool see Lottie was upset?

Nate's anger was evident, even to Wheatley. 'Calm yourself, Major Crawford,' he ordered, setting his glass down on the mantelpiece. He turned towards the couple and steepled his fingers under his chin. 'I comprehend that Lottie is concerned at this slightly unsettling news. But really, did you think I haven't thought of a solution?' He was almost smirking, Nate couldn't believe it.

Nate unsteadily raised himself until he was upright, Lottie's right hand still clasped in his. He now faced Wheatley full on, not quite towering over him but giving him the full force of his glare. A look that had in the past turned insubordinate recruits into quaking, obedient soldiers.

Wheatley merely curled his lip. 'Enough, Major Crawford. Save your anger and hard stares for the real villain. My solution involves making swift decisions and...' he turned to Lottie, 'I'm afraid, Lottie, you will need strong nerves if you wish to avoid your cousin's plans.'

Nate was puzzled; what did Wheatley mean? He had the odd feeling that the duke was not being completely frank. *Why?* Lottie moved to stand beside him, her shoulder brushing his arm. He heard her take a breath, then her voice, steady and resolute. 'I apologise if you think me missish, Your Grace. And apologies to you too, Nate. My lapse in controlling my emotions will not happen again. I confess, I was taken unaware by these disclosures. I'd almost become accustomed to the idea that there was nothing Jonah could do to me, but I see I was mistaken. What do you suggest?'

Wheatley acknowledged her apology with a brief inclination of his head, then gestured for her to sit. Elizabeth, who'd been shocked into silence by these events, moved over to sit beside Francis. He'd been regarding the whole much like someone at a play. Nate settled awkwardly next to Lottie.

'Well, your cousin can only take steps against you whilst you are unmarried, and my understanding is that, once he locates you, he will be able to get a magistrate to detain you on the grounds that you are not of sound mind.' Wheatley paused, a glint in his eye. 'Therefore, I suggest that the sooner you are wed, the better. He will then be powerless.'

'But we're planning to wed shortly,' answered Lottie.

Nate guessed she had not grasped the full import of Wheatley's words. He did. 'You mean, we should marry immediately... Gretna?' Of course. He'd have taken her there sooner if he'd suspected Jonah had an inkling of her location, never mind the gossip.

‘But what about the scandal? Wouldn’t Lottie’s reputation suffer?’ interjected a shocked Elizabeth.

‘It would be rather less of a scandal than being declared mentally unfit, don’t you think, Elizabeth my dear?’ pronounced Wheatley, eying his sister speculatively. ‘Not that I would recommend eloping in normal circumstances... just in case you were wondering.’

‘Hmph,’ she snorted in response.

Nate became aware of Lottie’s eyes boring into his face; she looked troubled and uncertain. He would have to reassure her again. But first he needed to make his peace with Wheatley. Damn the man for being right. Yet he still had the suspicion that he and Lottie were being manipulated... for what purpose he had no idea.

His voice was clipped as he spoke. ‘I must apologise, Wheatley. I mistook your manner for something else, but in fact it seems you have arrived at the nub of the problem ahead of me. I see that by my complacency I could easily have been outmanoeuvred by Jonah Benham.’

What a fool he’d been to overlook this possibility. It stuck in his craw to apologise to Wheatley, but damn it, the duke was correct. Lottie would still be at risk from her cousin until his ring was safely on her finger. If only he hadn’t been distracted so much by his damned leg. Things were definitely going to change. ‘Lottie, my dear, do you have any great objection to our marrying at Gretna? I fear it may be the only guaranteed way to keep you safe from your cousin’s machinations. Otherwise we may spend the next couple of weeks having a very anxious time of it. Jonah is sure to track you down once he speaks to the innkeeper at Knowle.’

His heart pounded in his chest at the thought of Jonah taking her away. Bile rose in his throat. She had to agree. He looked for her reaction. Her eyes, the colour of a winter’s sky, widened. She bit her bottom lip. He noted the quickening pulse at her throat, an outward side of her inner emotion. He held his breath, his mouth set in a firm line, waiting for her answer. She wouldn’t refuse, would she? The Lottie he knew was brave.

‘Of course I will come with you to Gretna, but only if you wish it and if you think it will not be objectionable to your father. The last thing I intend is to bring shame on your family. After all is said and done, I’m responsible for myself. I’ll understand if you wish to disengage yourself from helping me.’

Relief flooded through him, but awareness of their audience made his reply careful. He did not want to display his true feelings to Wheatley’s scornful condescension.

‘Lottie, Father thinks very highly of you and is delighted that we are to be wed, so dismiss any thoughts of changing your mind on that score. He’d be truly grieved if I left you to deal with your cousin on your own.’ He watched her face as he spoke; the look in her eyes changed from warmth to wariness, then resignation. What had he said to have such an effect? ‘I’ll make arrangements to

hire a post chaise, and we'll leave tomorrow,' he finished lamely.

'Allow me to provide your transport, Major Crawford.' Wheatley's words aroused Nate. He was interfering too much, and there was the persistent feeling that there was something behind the man's generosity, some ulterior motive that he could not yet discern.

'I've an excellent travelling coach. It has no livery to proclaim it as belonging to me, and has enabled me to travel discreetly when I don't wish to be identified.' Wheatley smiled at Francis. 'I'm sure Francis will attest to its comfort.'

Nate wondered why Francis, now the focus of everyone's regard, looked uncomfortable. He swallowed and blinked before answering. 'Yes, it is very comfortable, Nate. His Grace has been kind enough to permit me to use it when I've needed to get about discreetly.'

Nate saw Elizabeth give her brother a sharp look, but she remained silent.

'That's settled then,' declared Wheatley. 'I will give instructions for the coach to be ready to depart at first light. The sooner you are both on the road, the better. Major, your horse can remain here in the interim. Don't worry about breaking your fast before you leave. My chef will arrange for food for the first part of the journey. He's accustomed to my idiosyncrasies, so it will not be an inconvenience to him.'

Nate wasn't altogether convinced about that. It was probably more the case that the man had never dared complain for fear of losing his employment.

Nate watched as Wheatley surveyed the room from his vantage point at the fireplace. There was something triumphant about his attitude. 'Well, as at least two of you will be having an early start, I suggest it's time to retire. Elizabeth, please be kind and escort Lottie to her bedchamber.' Although the words were framed as a request, it was clear Wheatley had given an instruction. Elizabeth and Lottie both rose to take their leave of the gentlemen.

Wheatley turned his gaze to Nate, who eyed him suspiciously. He still hadn't decided whether he was angry or grateful for Wheatley's interference in his plans.

'Major Crawford... Nate, I'll summon a footman to guide you to your room. I wish you well, and Godspeed to Gretna.' He paused – there looked to be something like contrition in the duke's eyes, but Nate couldn't be sure. 'For what it's worth, I believe you're doing the right thing, Major. I look forward to seeing you and the new Mrs Crawford in the very near future. If you should encounter any difficulties on the way, send a message, and I will lend any assistance you require.' The duke shifted, examined his nails, then slowly returned his eyes to Nate's. 'And... I don't recall ever doing this before, by the way, but I can see by the sharp looks Francis is sending my way, he thinks I have overstepped the mark with you. And you are one of his dearest friends.' There was another hesitation – Nate wondered what was coming next. 'It seems I have made a misstep by taking control of your unfortunate situation. Will you accept my apology and know that it was done from the best of intentions?'

Nate wondered if there had been a social revolution that he had been unaware of. A duke – apologising – to him? He managed to recover himself. ‘I’m profoundly grateful for all your assistance, Wheatley. I’m only sorry that the idea of Gretna didn’t occur to me. I would do everything in my power to keep Miss Benham safe.’ Well, at least one of those sentences was sincere.

A footman appeared to conduct him to his chamber, and he bowed his goodnight to the duke and his friend. As he left, he heard Wheatley’s voice. ‘Come, Francis. I think I may have some dictation... or other work for you, before we retire.’

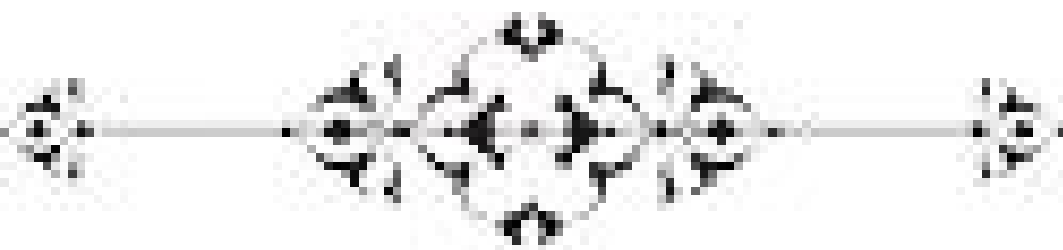


Upstairs, both ladies had reached the doorway to Lottie’s chamber. Elizabeth gave Lottie a quick embrace.

‘I won’t see you in the morning; I rise early to go riding, but not at first light. For what it’s worth, I think that what you are doing is right, regardless that some may think it scandalous. You will always be welcome here, rest assured. Major Crawford will take care of you. I can see he loves you, even if you are not yet convinced. Goodnight, my dear. I hope to see you again soon as the new Mrs Crawford.’

Lottie returned the hug. She was grateful for her newfound friend’s promise of support in the face of scandal. As she entered her bedchamber, she thought back to Nate’s response to her offer to release him from his obligations. There had been no mention of love. It was solely his sense of honour and chivalry as a gentleman that compelled him to help her, despite Elizabeth’s assertions to the contrary. If only that respect and regard would turn into love. She’d do everything in her power to make it so. And if it didn’t? Well, she’d be content to love him with her love unrequited.

# Chapter 14



THE CARRIAGE DOOR CLOSED and the equipage rolled off into the dark, two outriders following close behind. It was still not light, but both Nate and Lottie had been roused by the servants at the unearthly hour of four of the morning to ensure they set off well before dawn. It seemed Wheatley was intent on them making good progress to Gretna.

Nate leaned back into the squabs and contemplated his companion. Lottie had all the appearance of one who was still struggling to become fully awake. Her eyes were heavy with sleep, and wisps of hair, normally so neat and tidy, had escaped their pins and brushed against her cheeks. He smiled at her attempt to stifle a yawn and rub the sleep from her eyes. He was finding it difficult to breathe, her proximity almost suffocated him. Would she look this delectable every morning when he woke next to her? His thoughts wandered onwards, imagining delightful ways they would spend their married days together. Ways that involved not leaving the bedchamber.

Then reality intruded. Did she really want to marry him? Was her motive solely to avoid her cousin's dastardly plans? He'd seen the resignation in her eyes when he'd tried to reassure her the previous evening. He almost groaned aloud. She would surely tell him if she found the idea of marriage to him abhorrent, wouldn't she? He thought back on their conversations and encounters; she'd given no indication that she found him repulsive. She'd trusted him, cared for him... he grew hot again at the memory of her coming to his bedchamber on the night of his nightmare. *Oh, Lord, if only...*

'Why do you look so pleased?' Her voice cut into his thoughts. He wiped the smile off his face and sat upright, all his attention on her.

'Oh, just contemplating breakfast.' A lie, but there was no way he would disclose his true thoughts, not until he was more sure of her feelings, at any rate.

'You're in luck. There's a basket here, the footman said it came from the kitchen and that the cook's instructions were to eat while at least some of the contents are warm.' She lifted the cover of the large wicker basket on the seat beside her. The aroma of freshly baked bread filled the carriage. She closed her eyes, inhaled, and smiled. Nate was transfixed. How he wished it was he who had



caused that ecstatic expression on her face. He nearly missed her next words, lost as he was in contemplation of an activity far more exciting than eating breakfast. 'Oh, how lovely. I thought I was too tired to eat, but now I find I'm quite hungry.' He saw her slant him a puzzled look and remembered where he was. He'd definitely have to keep his thoughts under control. She took out a porcelain plate from the basket and placed a warm bread roll and a slice of ham on it before handing it to him. He ensured their fingers touched as he took the plate from her and was gratified to see her cheeks flush. It seemed she was not entirely unsusceptible to his presence, thank goodness.

He watched as she repeated the process for herself. She seemed relaxed. Perhaps broaching the subject of their impending nuptials now, without an audience, might elicit an honest answer from her. He took a deep breath, feeling very much as he had before leading a cavalry charge. All being well, he would not emerge from this encounter seriously wounded.

'This reminds me of our trek from Oxford, only this time at journey's end we'll be married. Are you entirely happy with that, Lottie?' His fingers clenched as he waited for her reply.

She'd been about to take a bite of bread and stopped, her hand paused halfway to her mouth. He saw the sideways look she gave him before she answered. 'More to the point, are you entirely happy, Nate? I don't wish to be a burden to you. All I ever wanted was to escape my cousin, to avoid him until my birthday. The last thing I expected was to embroil anyone else in my affairs.'

She'd neatly sidestepped his question. Quelling his disappointment at her prevarication, he made an effort to keep his voice steady, not to let his emotions show. 'I'm not having second thoughts, Lottie. I want to keep you safe, and this is the only way I can see of doing that. Besides, you've cared for me when I needed help. As I said when I first proposed, I think we will deal very well together.' No need to scare her with the knowledge that he felt unable to face life without her presence, but should he have reminded her about his first inept attempt at a proposal?

He could have sworn that a flash of disappointment crossed her face, but at her words he knew he'd been mistaken. 'Yes indeed. We will deal well together.' She gave him a brief smile and returned to nibbling her bread. They both continued in silence, the ease between them gone, each engrossed in their own thoughts.



The weather was clear and the roads dry, so good progress was made. That first evening when they stopped, after ensuring that Lottie was safe and comfortably lodged in her own bedchamber, Nate decided to undertake his normal nightly routine. He'd done the same thing each evening when on campaign, ensuring all the men in his charge were accounted for and dealing with any problems. Picking his way carefully over the cobbled yard to the stables – his cane kept getting caught in the cracks – he noted with approval that everywhere appeared clean and tidy. He caught the eye of Wheatley's coachman as he exited the main stable. The man respectfully touched his hat. 'Is anything amiss, Major?'

'No, not at all. Tom, isn't it?' The coachman nodded, and Nate continued. 'I just thought I'd make sure everything was all right at your end, both horses and men. I'm sure you've seen to the horses' comfort, but are you and your comrades comfortably lodged?' There was an undergroom accompanying the coachman as well as two outriders.

'Yes, Major. Me and Toby have a good billet above the horses, as do Jim and Harry. They've all gone off to the taproom for a pint and a bite. Just thought I'd have a last quick check to make sure the horses are settled and then I'll be joining them... unless you need me for anything, sir?'

'No, you go and get something to eat. You've had a long day.'

The coachman shook his head. 'Not as long as it might have been, Major. His Grace ordered that we should travel through the night when possible, to make good time. Told me the Marquess of Huntly rode from Aberdeen to Inverness in around seven hours, and said he saw no reason why we shouldn't be able to manage similar feats.' The man chuckled. 'Mind you, the duke does not drive his horses into the ground, he makes sure they are well looked after, he does.'

'It seems the duke also has some very dedicated staff.'

The coachman smiled and scratched his chin with a grubby finger. 'Thank you, Major. He's a hard taskmaster, but he's fair and he pays better than most. He cares for his livestock.' Reminded of the lavish stables at Begley Hall, Nate was bound to agree. 'There will be a moon tomorrow night, so with your agreement, Major, I think we should drive through the night.' The coachman gazed up at the night sky. 'With luck, it will be cloudless too.'

'Yes, sounds like a reasonable plan,' agreed Nate. 'But you're not concerned about highwaymen?'

'No, Major. I've checked with the innkeeper, and he says there are no reports of highwaymen hereabouts. Besides, me and the men are well armed and there are concealed pistols in the carriage. I'll show you where they are before we leave in the morning. First light again, is it?'

'Yes, good man. I'll see you in the morning then. Tell the innkeeper to draw each of you a tankard of ale and charge it to my account.'

'Thank you kindly, Major.' The man tipped his hat again and strode off towards the taproom, from where the melodic sounds of a fiddle and laughter could be heard.

Nate headed back to his room. Might as well try and get some sleep. Dawn would be here soon enough, and they had many miles to travel. He recalled the growing tension he'd felt after his brief conversation with Lottie that morning, the knots in his stomach. He'd been a fool to ask her about her feelings. If only he dared tell her how much he wanted her. Would that make things better between them?

The thought of being in such close proximity with Lottie for another long day sent his pulse racing. He would have to use all his willpower to keep his passions under control. Normally his emotions were easy to keep in check. He'd never been one to wear his heart on his sleeve, but being with Lottie swept away all the barriers to his emotions. She only had to smile, and he was lost. He grinned to himself as he climbed the stairs to his room. Tomorrow was only the second day of their journey. He had several more to win her heart before they reached Gretna, and win her heart he would.



Up in the cosy bedchamber that Nate had secured for her, Lottie lay awake. Sounds from the taproom below could be heard, a fiddle playing and male voices singing, not always in tune. Footsteps across the cobbled yard, the clatter of dishes as the door to the scullery opened. In the distance a dog howled. All these noises conspired to keep her awake. But even if all had been total silence, her own confused thoughts alone would have kept her from sleep.

Nate had been the perfect gentleman throughout the day. He'd asked her if she was happy to marry him. *Goodness, if he only knew!* But she hadn't dared tell him the truth. He'd never mentioned the word love, only reassuring her and stressing that he wanted to keep her safe. He might be mortified to discover how much she felt for him. And, despite all the opportunities their close proximity in an enclosed carriage afforded, he had not given her one hint that he had deeper feelings for her.

In short, she didn't have an alternative solution. She would have to resign herself to marrying a man for whom she harboured the deepest of feelings, but who did not reciprocate. She brushed a tear away from her eye and tried once again to summon sleep. Before she drifted off, she was aware of someone moving around in the adjacent room. She knew it was Nate, and that he was turning in for the night. Comforted by the thought that he was close by, she nestled into the

blankets and finally fell into a deep slumber.



The next day followed much the same pattern as the first. The coach only stopped for brief periods, sufficient for them to stretch their legs and use the facilities. Nate felt sorry for the men, who were all exposed to the elements. Once they reached the exposed fells of Lancashire and Cumbria, the rainclouds gathered, and a persistent drizzle fell. The only blessing was that the temperature was quite mild, but even so, he thought they must be chilled to the bone. As the light began to fade, he leaned out of the coach window and signalled to one of the outriders, who urged his mount closer. Nate caught the whiff of wet horse, an aroma that evoked memories of his time in the Peninsula, camping out in all weathers under the stars.

‘Jim, how far to the next inn?’ he shouted, over the noise of the pounding hooves and the rumble of the wheels.

Jim spurred his horse forward to confer with the coach driver then hung back again till he was level with Nate’s head once more. ‘Tom says only another couple of miles, Major. With your agreement, he says we should rest there awhile in the hope these rainclouds clear and we have moonlight to guide our way. Rain’s not that heavy, so the roads shouldn’t be too mired.’

‘That sounds sensible,’ Nate agreed. ‘No point in floundering around when there is no light, and if the roads deteriorate in this weather, we will be in trouble.’

Jim raised his hand to show he understood and returned to his position behind the coach. Nate withdrew from the window and settled back into his seat. He saw Lottie’s questioning look. ‘We’re going to stop at the next inn until this rain ceases,’ he explained. ‘With any luck, there’ll be some moonlight if the clouds disperse, and then we’ll carry on through the night. But there should be sufficient time for us to eat a proper meal and warm ourselves. You’d enjoy that, wouldn’t you?’

He’d taken note of the shadows under her eyes and her pale complexion, yet she’d not uttered one complaint. He was certain any other female would be tearing him off a strip by now and complaining vociferously at being compelled to travel at this punishing pace.

‘Yes, it would be nice to stretch my legs.’ She blushed, as if she shouldn’t have

mentioned her legs, and quickly added, 'I'm sure the men will also be glad of a break and a chance to warm themselves. They've been so diligent, and I've not heard them complain once. And you... you will surely be grateful for an opportunity to move around. Is your leg very troublesome?'

He'd come over all hot when she'd spoken of her legs and the memory of her in his bedchamber immediately came to his mind, her figure silhouetted by the light of the candle. Then he heard her ask about the men and all indulgent thoughts were driven away by the realisation of how observant she was. He had tried to be discreet about the pain in his leg, massaging it only when he thought she was engrossed in her book or sleeping; he had not been discreet enough. His leg muscles, deprived of any real stretching or movement, were burning with an intense pain. He was desperate to stand upright and walk around. The continuous jolting of the coach, despite it boasting the latest and most luxurious appointments and suspension, was becoming insupportable. 'Yes, it's a little painful, but no matter, I'm sure with a bit of a walk and a stretch it will soon settle,' was his gruff reply.



Lottie stifled her impulse to show her disbelief. How like a man to make little of his discomfort, and especially a man like Nate, a soldier accustomed to all the deprivations of life campaigning with Wellington. She'd been aware for some hours that he was suffering significant pain, and therefore she had feigned sleep to allow him to massage and stretch his leg across the coach seats without feeling embarrassed at her presence. She would suggest he had a hot bath at the next stop; that should help with his muscle pains. If he refused, she would act the delicate female and insist that she needed to rest for the sake of her nerves.

She almost giggled aloud at the thought of her pretending to be fragile. She was beginning to realise that was the last thing she was. She also wasn't the fool that her father had accused her of being. Deep inside she'd always known it.

'What is causing you to smile?' His voice broke into her thoughts.

Startled, she said the first thing that came into her head. 'Oh, I was just thinking how nice it will be to stop for a while and enjoy this beautiful scenery, though I suppose it will be dark by the time we arrive at the next inn?'

'Yes, it will. But surely a moonlit night and the beauty of the stars in the sky will compensate for the lack of sunlit scenery?'

She gave him a sharp look. He was speaking like a hero from a novel by Mrs Radcliffe, not like himself at all. Her surprise must have shown on her face, because he turned away and cleared his throat. 'You surprise me,' she said. 'I didn't take you for someone who regards the night sky as a thing of beauty. Being a soldier, I thought you were only concerned with practical matters.'

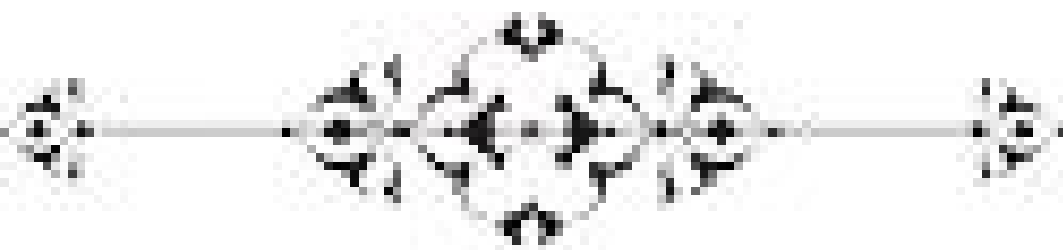
'You do me an injustice, Lottie,' he replied. 'I've spent many a night under the stars, marvelling at their number and wondering if life exists in places other than Earth. I've found that gazing at the night sky reminds me of how insignificant we really are in the scheme of things.'

His honesty prompted her to confess. 'Yes, I know what you mean. I often used to steal out into the garden at night to watch the heavens. It was very calming and peaceful to stand in silence, seeing those thousands of twinkling lights, invisible by day, and think that someone else, somewhere in the world, was doing the exact same thing. I couldn't believe I was the only person to be overawed by their spectacle.' Had she really shared those thoughts? Would he think her a complete fool?

'Well. Now you know, I was that person also gazing at the sky, thinking the same thoughts,' he answered, grasping her hand and giving it a squeeze. A tingling sensation spread up her arm, and she caught her breath. Was he... was he about to declare feelings for her?

He opened his mouth to speak, but the sound that emerged was a groan as he dropped her hand and gripped his leg. The coach had turned abruptly, swinging him sideways across the seat. They were pulling into the yard of the inn, having finally reached Penrith.

# Chapter 15



IT REQUIRED NO ACTING skills for Lottie to persuade Nate to take advantage of their forced stay and order a couple of rooms and a bath. The innkeeper had assured them that the drizzle would cease in the early hours, and it would be as well for them to enjoy a proper break. Nate thought it would no doubt also be beneficial to the landlord's purse. However, seeing how bedraggled the coachmen and outriders looked, he was happy for them all to have a respite for a few hours. What difference would it make, after all? He was feeling wretched.

He ordered a hot bath for himself, and one for Lottie, and arranged for a meal to be served afterwards in one of the inn's several parlours. After escorting Lottie to her room and requesting that she join him in the parlour appointed for their meal in two hours' time, he hobbled awkwardly round the inn yard to ease the pain in his leg. He was frustrated and angry with himself; how could he have got his timing all wrong? Everything had been going so well. He'd managed to find that spark within himself that had used to work so well in the past with ladies. But now he really meant those words... wanted her to understand that he truly believed there was a link between them. He'd been on the point of declaring his feelings as he gazed into her eyes, when the pain in his damned leg had swept everything away.

He took in his surroundings and noted that several other visitors were staying at the inn. A couple of travelling chaises were lodged in one of the inn's outbuildings, and the stables appeared full. Catching the eye of an ostler, who had just finished settling one of the newly arrived horses, he called over. 'Business seems brisk at the moment, or are you always this busy?'

'Well, sir, we're usually quite busy, being as we are on the road to Scotland.' He cast Nate a knowing look. 'But not often as full as this. Besides yourselves, we have a party of gentlemen staying here, meeting up with a friend who has only just arrived. Come from the coast, I think. Their horses are not a patch on yours though, sir, if I may say so, just jobbing horses. Still, I shall look after them all.' He banged the stable door closed and went over to fetch a bale of fodder.

'I'll leave you to it then. Goodnight,' said Nate. He watched the man heave the bale onto his shoulder, wishing he could move with such ease. He turned and

limped awkwardly back across the yard. Only a few stairs to his room and he would be able to lie in a hot bath. What bliss. Maybe he'd have to put off gazing at the stars with Lottie for another night, unless his leg improved dramatically within the next hour or so.



Lottie stepped out of her bath. How wonderful it was to feel clean again. She dressed quickly and put her hair up, dismissing the maid who had been sent up to assist. What time was it? Surely their meal would be served shortly – she knew Nate had been quite specific with the innkeeper that they would only be resting until the skies cleared. They would be off again in a couple of hours, and certainly before dawn broke. He'd been quite abrupt with the men when they arrived at the inn, not in a nasty way, but not his usual easy manner. It must be the pain in his leg, she thought. They had been getting on so well, she'd even confided her silly imaginings. The look he'd given her as he took her hand, so intense she'd thought her chest would burst with the beating of her heart.

But the lurching of the coach had upset everything. He'd cursed under his breath and his face had turned ashen. How she'd wanted to tell him to rest until he felt better, to care for him. But no, he'd forced himself out of the coach to give orders to the men and the landlord, seeing to her comfort before his own. She hoped the brief respite had eased his pain; no doubt she would soon find out.

She listened at her door. The lively sounds of a busy inn reached her ears, footsteps clattering over the stone-flagged floors, shouts from the potboys, the occasional crash of a pot breaking. The inn appeared to be doing a roaring trade. Undaunted by all the commotion, Lottie decided to venture down to their private parlour – perhaps Nate was already there waiting for her. Stepping into the corridor, she locked the door behind her, secreting the key in her reticule, and started down the wooden stairs. As she'd expected, all was bustle in the hallway below. Serving maids rushed this way and that, carrying trays laden with food and tankards of ale. The aromas of hot meat pies and warm bread tickled her nose, making her stomach rumble and her taste buds tingle in anticipation. She was hungrier than she had thought. Increasing her pace, she reached the bottom of the stairs and looked around. Now, which doorway led to the parlour allocated to them? She couldn't quite remember.

'Lost your way, Miss? Are you from the party just arrived?' a maidservant



inquired, her cheeks glistening with sweat, as she halted in her progress back to the kitchen.

‘Yes, I am.’ Lottie was sure they had been the last to arrive.

The maid gestured with her head, her arms being too full of empty tankards. ‘Through that door there, that be your parlour.’

‘Thank you kindly.’

Lottie went to the door indicated by the maid and stepped into the parlour. Inside the candlelit room a fire blazed at one end, where two male figures stood warming themselves. Disturbed by the noise of the door opening, they both turned to regard her. She froze in shock, and the air in her lungs seemed to leave her body. It couldn’t be. There surely couldn’t be someone else who so closely resembled her cousin Jonah? His companion nodded to someone across the room and out of her vision. The door closed with a click behind her, but she was unable to react. Icy shivers crept up her spine and her limbs refused to obey. This could not be really happening. Then a familiar, odious voice told her that the situation she found herself in was horrifyingly real.

‘Well, well, well. Fancy finding you here, Charlotte. I knew it was you as soon as you stepped down from that rather fancy-looking rig.’

Paralysed with shock and fear, she understood how a rabbit felt, transfixed by a weasel. Jonah was coming towards her, eyes glinting and a satisfied sneer on his face. A fortuitous crash of dishes outside in the hallway brought her to her senses. Galvanised at last, she turned to rush back out of the room, only to find a leering Basil Montgomery leaning against the door, his arms crossed against his chest.

Her heart thudding, she turned back to face Jonah, who had now moved closer.

‘What a happy coincidence that we meet once more, Cousin. I confess I was rather nonplussed when you disappeared... quite vexed in fact. You see, I had plans for you. Plans I can now put into action. Fate must be on my side.’ He smirked, and his cold eyes raked over her body. Her skin crawled as he took her arm, pulling her, despite her struggles, further into the room. His fingers bit into her flesh.

‘Let me go,’ were the only words she managed to get out. Before she could emit any further sound, a large, sweaty hand clamped down over her face, stifling her protests. Jonah’s fingers released her as whoever was holding her, she guessed it was Basil, locked her arms by her sides.

*Think, think.* What could she do? Her mind was in turmoil; how could they have ended up in the same inn as her cousin? And what was he involved in? She desperately needed to make a noise, alert someone... *Oh God, where, oh where was Nate?*

Hissed words reached her ears. ‘Who is zis woman, Benham? We should not be drawing attention to ourselves, all will be lost if we are discovered.’ The speaker sounded foreign, his English imperfect and heavily accented. She couldn’t see

him clearly, but knew it was the voice of the figure still standing by the fireside, his face in shadow.

Jonah turned towards him, waving his arms in a conciliatory gesture. 'Don't worry, Dubois. Our business here is finished. You go on your way, and we'll leave shortly too, taking a separate route. Hopefully it will be some time before my cousin is missed, and by then we'll all be some distance away. By splitting up, we will confuse and delay any pursuit.'

'Bah! So be it. I hope you are correct, otherwise you will 'ave jeopardised everything.'

Basil still had her arms pinned to her sides and his hand covered most of her face, but she'd heard everything. It all added up: the duke's information was correct – Jonah was involved in treachery, a traitor to his country. He was indeed despicable in every way.

Aware that Basil was manoeuvring her towards the fireplace, she forced herself to stop struggling. She could tell they were quite near the blazing grate by the heat that was beginning to scorch her legs. Basil's hold on her arms slackened, and through his fingers she spied the fire irons. If only he would loosen his grip a little more.

The pressure on her face at last relaxed, and she took her chance. She opened her mouth and bit down hard. Teeth met bone. Basil let out a piercing yell and jerked his hand away from her mouth, at the same time releasing her arms. She didn't hesitate. She lurched towards the fire-iron stand and grabbed the largest poker. Swinging it round, she aimed for Basil. It made a sickening crack as it met his shoulder, and he tumbled forward, catching his head on the side of the fireplace and collapsing in a heap across the hearth.

Gasping for breath and shocked at her own audacity, she held onto the poker. She spun round to face Jonah who, motionless and eyes wide, stared at his friend's inert body. Unluckily for her, the stranger was not similarly affected. He strode towards her and she stiffened as she saw the pistol now pointed in her direction.

'Nice try, *ma chérie*. Put zat down or I will have no compunction in killing you.' The Frenchman's words were carefully enunciated, and she believed him. His accented voice was cold and his eyes chilled with their emotionless stare. He gave Jonah a shove with his free hand. 'Take zat away from 'er. We need to alter our plans.'

Jonah, roused from his inertia, gingerly removed the poker from her grasp and held her arm in a painful grip, twisting it up behind her back. Lottie stared down at Basil's prostrate figure and felt sick. Had she really killed a man? The slight rise and fall of his chest told her he breathed. *Thank God*. No matter whether he deserved to die, she would be unable to live with herself if she'd caused his death.

Several moments must have passed, she couldn't tell. She looked up to see the Frenchman advancing towards her, this time with a glass in his hand, filled with

what appeared to be red wine. Her head was roughly tugged back and the glass pressed to her lips. 'Drink,' he ordered.

Determined to do no such thing, Lottie clenched her mouth shut. A second later she opened it with a yelp of pain when she was kicked. The liquid went down her throat, making her choke and cough. There was a pause until her breathing resumed, then her nose was pinched, forcing her to gasp, and more of the evil-tasting liquid was poured into her mouth. She had no option but to swallow. The procedure was repeated until the glass was empty. She coughed and retched; her throat burned. Was she going to die? As if he'd read her thoughts, the Frenchman spoke. 'Don't worry, my dear. I 'aven't poisoned you; this will just make you more amenable.' There was a chuckle that sent a shiver down her spine.

Then Lottie's world started to dissolve into swirling shapes and sounds. She needed to lie down, her legs would no longer hold her upright. A hand on her elbow guided her to the wooden settle in the corner of the room as everything went black.



Nate finished tying his neckcloth. He did feel better after his long soak. Jaunty almost. He flexed his left leg, raising it off the floor and straightening and bending the knee. *Much better.* It was a wonder what a hot bath could do for a man. That walk with Lottie after dinner was looking a distinct possibility. Through the window he saw the last of the clouds in the night sky scudding away to the east, leaving the silvery crescent moon to cast an eerie light over the distant fells. As if on cue, a glorious host of stars had appeared, pinpricks of light on a black velvet background.

Shrugging on his jacket and taking a final anxious look in the mirror to ensure he was presentable, he picked up his cane and strode out of the door. His nerves tingled with anticipation. Had he kept her waiting too long? He made a cursory tap on the door of the parlour that the innkeeper had indicated would be reserved for their meal and, without waiting for a reply, walked in. The fire was burning merrily in the grate, and the table was laid. A bottle of wine stood open, and two glasses awaited filling, but of Lottie there was no sign.

Perhaps she was waiting for his escort downstairs. Silly of him, of course she would not venture downstairs on her own. He left the room, made his way

upstairs again, and knocked on Lottie's door.

'Lottie, it's me, Nate. Are you ready for dinner? I'll escort you down.'

Silence. He knocked again and listened for any sounds of movement. 'Lottie, is everything all right?' Again silence. His jaw clenched. He rattled the door handle. It was firmly locked. *No need to panic. She's bound to be somewhere downstairs, just need to find her.* His military training took over and he forced himself to remain calm.

Spinning on his heels, in an approximation of a run, he lurched towards the stairs. He grabbed the arm of the serving maid who was crossing the hallway; laden down with empty tankards, she glared up at him. Her mouth opened to remonstrate at his rough handling.

'Miss, have you seen the young lady who arrived with me earlier? She's not in her room and I think she may have mistaken which parlour was reserved for our meal. I need to find her.' His respectful but firm tone stopped the words of rebuke that were about to leave her lips.

'Why, I think that must be the young lady I directed into that parlour over there.' She nodded with her head to the door across the passageway. 'I was advised by the gentleman in there to look out for her. He said you and she had arranged to meet with him and his friends.'

Nate fought to keep his composure in front of the maid, but inside his mind whirled. Who on earth knew they were at the inn? He released her arm and, muttering a brief thank-you, he strode awkwardly across. He turned the handle without knocking and entered. Always take the enemy by surprise; instinct told him it was an enemy.

A scene of horror awaited him, forcing the air out of his lungs. Lottie was laid out on the settle under the window; her eyes were closed and her colour wan. Another body, a male to judge by the clothing, lay inert near the grate, blood pooling from a wound to the head. Nate's first impulse was to rush towards Lottie, but as he did so, the door clicked behind him and the barrel of what he knew to be a pistol made itself felt in the small of his back.

A tall figure stepped out of the shadows near the settle on which Lottie lay. So there were at least two of them. 'Good evening. Crawford, *n'est-ce pas*? We wondered when you would appear.' The voice was cold, emotionless, and decidedly French. What was going on? How did this Frenchman know his name?

'Who are you? What have you done to Lottie, Miss Benham?' Nate tried to keep his own voice equally emotionless. It wouldn't do to let his opponent know how his temper raged.

'So, you're the chap who ran off with my cousin. I hadn't realised she was such a lightskirt. I'd have had my fun a lot sooner if I had known.' The voice came from behind him this time, the one holding the pistol against his back. Nate's hands clenched into fists, longing to smash their way into the man's face. This was the bastard who'd terrified Lottie and driven her from home.

'Never mind zat now, Benham. Bring him 'ere. Sit on zis chair, Crawford. I'll

take zat.' The Frenchman wrested the cane from Nate's grasp.

Nate's mind raced. Wheatley's information had been correct: Lottie's cousin was involved in espionage. But how in God's name had they contrived to be at the same inn? Had Wheatley knowledge of Benham's whereabouts that he had withheld? Nate's suspicions grew.

The Frenchman pulled a chair out from the table in the centre of the room and Nate felt the pistol in his back prod him forward. He moved awkwardly towards the chair, all the while his eyes flicking here and there, seeking something that might help him. Anything at all. His eyes rested on Lottie's lifeless form. She was deathly pale.

'Don't worry, she lives for now. We 'ave decided she may still be useful.' The Frenchman's words caused the hairs on the back of Nate's neck to rise. What did the devil mean? He growled and tried to stand up, determined to do some injury to the leering blackguard who even now was stroking the unconscious Lottie's head.

A hand forced him to sit down and his arms were dragged backwards to be tied up. He guessed it was Jonah's voice that hissed in his ear. 'I'd no idea my cousin had a penchant for lame soldiers. Oh yes, I observed you crossing the innyard. Does your leg give you much trouble?' The man moved round into Nate's sightline. Jonah was as obnoxious-looking as he'd expected him to be. Sharp pointed features, weasel-like blue eyes, and blond strawlike hair. His mouth formed a triumphant smirk.

'So, you're the slipgibbet Miss Benham has the misfortune to be related to?' growled Nate in response. 'What are you up to now, Benham? What treachery are you planning with your colleague here?' A blow landed across Nate's face, cutting off his words.

'Quite the hero, aren't you? Wounded at Talavera, your coachman said. A fool just like my brother, getting himself killed, and what for? A mad king.' Jonah rubbed his knuckles and leaned back against the table, intent on gloating further. 'I told him there were easier ways to make money, and I was right. Just going to sort the loose ends out here,' Jonah flicked his head over at Lottie, 'and here. I had plans for her that I can now put back into action.'

Nate's roar of anger was stifled as Jonah bludgeoned his bad leg with the butt of the pistol. He slumped over in agony. Beneath the searing pain, his rage boiled. He'd really enjoy smashing the man's teeth down his throat as soon as the opportunity arose.

Jonah's cackle of laughter was brought to an abrupt end by the Frenchman's words. 'Enough! No time for zat now. We need to get away before we are discovered. My man will 'elp to get the girl into your carriage. Zen you can finish 'im off.' He handed Jonah something sharp and pointed, a stiletto.

'Me? I've never...' Jonah didn't sound quite so sure of himself now.

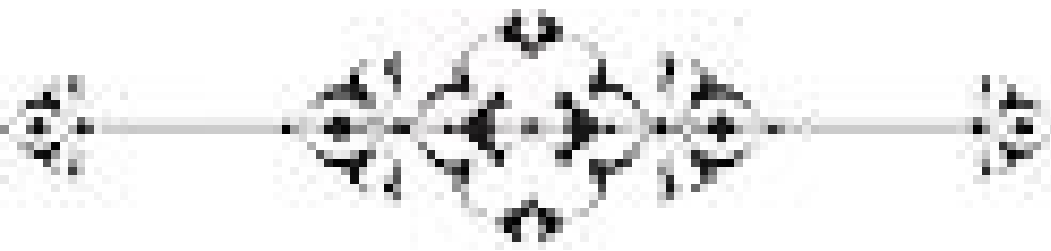
'*Mon dieu*, pull yourself together. Do you want to be caught? Prove you are loyal to France and Bonaparte, not your pathetic mad king,' his companion

hissed.

Head still bowed in pain, Nate heard the exchange between the two conspirators. So Jonah did have some scruples. He prayed the man wouldn't overcome them. He raised his head slightly and squinted across to see the Frenchman place a small bottle of opaque green glass on the table. It was half filled with a dark liquid. Nate guessed it was some form of drug. This was confirmed by the Frenchman's next words. 'Keep 'er drugged and take 'er to our friend. I zink many of your English aristos would pay well for all zey could do to 'er, even if she is not a virgin. And, best of all, ze money will support our cause, *mon ami*. It is apt, no?'

Despite the pain in his leg, the Frenchman's words filled Nate with so much disgust and rage he knew he had to throttle the bastard. He lurched to his feet, taking the chair he was tied to with him. A sickening impact on the back of his head brought darkness and oblivion.

# Chapter 16



COLD WATER AND A slap to his face brought Nate to his senses. He was not dead; a stiletto had not been thrust between his ribs. Thank God, Jonah was an even bigger coward than he'd suspected. Eyes still closed, Nate evaluated his condition. There was the familiar pain in his leg, which currently felt as if he'd been wounded a second time, but now there was an additional torment at the back of his head. How long had he been unconscious? He was no longer tied to a chair, his arms hung limply at his sides and his head had been resting on the table before him. He opened his eyes to find a gentleman he'd never encountered before glaring at him. The innkeeper hovered behind the man, hands on his hips and also glaring.

Nate jerked his head round. A piercing pain shot through his forehead, but he didn't care. His overriding concerns were for Lottie. Where was she? He couldn't see her. For that matter, there was no sign of the Frenchman or Jonah. The only thing in the room that he recalled being there when he first entered, however many hours ago that had been, was the body stretched out on the floor in front of the fireplace. Curiously, there was now more blood spattered about. He didn't remember it being splashed over the hearth and the adjacent walls. Dismissing this puzzle from his mind to be dealt with later, he turned his bleary eyes back to the glowering gentleman.

'You've got some explaining to do, Major Crawford. One of your friends has been murdered, and all the evidence points to you as the culprit.' The man's rasped words made no sense.

Nate swallowed. His throat was dry and his head ached abominably. 'What do you mean? Haven't murdered anyone,' he managed at last. 'Where is Miss Benham? Where are the other two gentlemen who were here? In this room.' He glared back at his accuser. 'Who are you to libel me thus?'

'I am George Jenkins, the local magistrate,' replied the gentleman, a satisfied sneer on his lips. 'Mr Oldcastle here sent for me, said there'd been a murder done.'

The innkeeper's head bobbed up and down in agreement. Jenkins patted his waistcoat and straightened the cuffs of his jacket. 'I'm going to have to keep you

locked up until we get to the bottom of things, Major. Then it will be the Assizes in Lancaster, I daresay.'

Nate could tell by the man's look of self-importance that he was relishing his position of command. He would have to deal with him quickly. Lottie was in danger. Nate straightened his back and summoned up his best officer voice. 'I understand your concerns, but I can assure you I have committed no murder. I was knocked unconscious from behind. Prior to that, when I entered this parlour that man was lying face upwards and he was definitely breathing. There also appears to be a lot more blood. The person who killed him would be covered in it, wouldn't he?' He rose unsteadily to display his pristine jacket and shirt; his upraised hands were also clean of blood. Thank God for that. He should have checked first, of course.

Jenkins' superior expression turned to one of uncertainty. Nate knew he had the man on the back foot. 'Send a message to the Duke of Wheatley. He will be able to confirm my credentials. I have reason to believe that I interrupted a meeting between a French spy and a traitor to England. He has taken Miss Benham and means to do her ill. If anything should happen to her because of delays caused by you...' He paused to let his words sink in. 'I promise you will regret it. The Duke will not be pleased.' If he laid it on thickly, they might think twice before locking him up.

Jenkins sucked in his breath and the innkeeper's face paled. They exchanged worried glances. It was Jenkins who spoke first. 'Oldcastle, was there a Frenchman here? What do you know?'

Wringing his hands in his apron, all confidence gone, the innkeeper answered, 'Had a strange accent. Told me he was Irish... said he was meeting two friends and needed a parlour. Would only be staying a short while. Then two other gentlemen arrived. One with pale skin and blond hair, said his name was Benham. And that one there.' He pointed with a stubby finger to the bloodied body on the floor. 'Major Crawford and his companion arrived separately later.'

'When did they leave?' The magistrate huffed at Nate's curt interruption but did not speak.

The landlord scratched his head and frowned. 'About two hours ago, I reckon. One went west towards the coast, and t'other went south. My lads said they were in a fair bit of a hurry. Said it was because the young lady was unwell. She had to be helped into the coach. Looked very pale, she did.'

'Which vehicle did she go in?' Nate prayed it was the one going south; he'd have a better chance of finding her if she was still in the country. Goodness knows where they would take her if she was on board a ship. Whitehaven was the nearest port and it was a busy one. Would anyone notice the comings and goings of each vessel and all the passengers who embarked?

'She went with the pale gentleman, to the south. He said she was his cousin and he was taking her home.'

There was a crash and the door to the parlour burst open. Jim, the Duke's man,



strode in.

‘Now, what’s all this? I gave instructions we were not to be disturbed.’

Ignoring the magistrate’s barked words, Jim marched straight over to Nate. ‘Major Crawford, what’s happened? We saw two coaches leaving earlier and someone said murder had been committed. Are you all right, sir?’

Nate rubbed his eyes and brushed the hair out of his face; lying face forward on the dining table had done no favours to his appearance. No wonder the magistrate thought him a reprobate. He gave a reassuring smile. ‘I’m a little dishevelled as you can see, but being cracked over the head doesn’t seem to have caused me lasting harm, Jim. My main concern is for Miss Benham. It seems she’s been abducted.’

Jenkins cut in, his voice harsh and accusing. He had recovered some of his bluster. ‘Now there’s no proof of this. Oldcastle here says the gentleman who took her is her cousin.’ Then he added with a sneering flourish, ‘He also tells me that one of your men was overheard to say you were on your way to Gretna. Do you deny that you were in fact Miss Benham’s abductor?’ Jenkins folded his arms across his chest, the very image of outraged sensibility.

Before Nate could refute the charge, Jim leapt to his defence. ‘Begging your pardon, gentlemen. T’was on the orders of His Grace the Duke of Wheatley that we were escorting Miss Benham and the major here to Gretna. His Grace was most insistent that we use this route to ensure the journey was completed in as short a time as possible. I was given to understand that the young lady was in some danger if she remained unwed to the major.’ Nate’s ears pricked up at the mention of Wheatley’s recommendation of the route.

Jenkins’ face became incandescent. ‘How dare you speak to your betters like that, man? Who are you to tell me that the Duke of Wheatley is involved in this matter? For all I know, you’re in this man’s pay.’ He sent Nate a look that would have sent a lesser man fleeing; Nate rolled his eyes.

Jim fumbled about in his jacket and pulled out a folded piece of parchment. He held the document out to the magistrate, who regarded it with distaste. But there was now a trace of uncertainty in his expression. ‘What’s this, something else to confound me?’ He took it from Jim’s hand and examined the seal. Nate could see the red wax bore the indentation of a lion’s head and a large initial W.

‘His Grace instructed me to show this to anyone in authority if we encountered problems on the journey,’ Jim said, his voice gruff.

Nate’s brain whirled. It seemed Wheatley had thought of everything. Had he been aware that Benham was planning a rendezvous at this inn? Had he contrived for their paths to cross? Nate’s stomach knotted. How dare Wheatley put Lottie’s life at risk! Or had the duke planned that his duped major would save the day? If so, Wheatley had badly misjudged. A wave of shame swept through him. He had failed.

Jenkins sucked in his cheeks and broke the seal. The sound roused Nate from his introspection, and he watched as the magistrate drew out a pince-nez from

his waistcoat pocket, placed it carefully on the end of his nose, and began to read. After what seemed like an age, Jenkins lifted his eyes from the paper and turned them on Nate. His gaze was now more respectful, though Nate discerned the man's inner struggle to maintain his authority. 'According to this,' Jenkins waved the paper in front of Nate, 'Wheatley thinks very highly of you, Major Crawford. He has ordered that you should be given every assistance and that the security of the country may be at stake.'

Nate nodded. Inwardly he wondered if Wheatley was doing it a bit too brown. Low-level spying perhaps, but what did Wheatley mean about the security of the country? Who was the Frenchman rendezvousing with Lottie's cousin? What secrets did Jonah have that were valuable to the French? He had no access to government papers. But this confirmed that the duke had deliberately put Lottie's life in danger. Anger welled up inside Nate's breast. His brief experience at Horse Guards had shown him just how brutal Napoleon's agents could be, killing without discrimination and believing only in the rightness of their cause. His stomach lurched at the thought of Lottie being held by such ruthless criminals.

Deciding he needed to re-take control of the situation, Nate got to his feet. But too quickly. He swayed as the room swam before his eyes and he braced his hands on the table to steady himself. To his surprise, Jenkins came towards him and put an arm on his shoulder, pushing him back into his seat. 'Sit down, Major Crawford. Oldcastle, fetch a coffee for the major.'

The innkeeper scurried out of the room to do the magistrate's bidding and Jenkins pulled a chair up next to Nate. Nate was aware of Jim's protective presence on his other side; it seemed his burly guard was not going to budge until he was sure his employer's dupe was safe from arrest.

Jenkins' tone was considerably more conciliatory now. 'Tell me what assistance I can give you, Major.' He cleared his throat, and Nate wondered what was coming next; he didn't have long to wait. 'You will let the duke know I have aided you, won't you? I do not want to incur his displeasure.' There was a glimmer of fear in the magistrate's eyes.

Nate suppressed an inappropriate smirk. Trust the man's self-interest to be the real reason to offer his assistance. But he would make use of it all the same... he needed to find Lottie.



Within a short space of time the corpse was covered and removed to an outbuilding to await the arrival of the coroner. They adjourned to another parlour, abruptly cleared of its occupants by the now keenly cooperative landlord. Nate formed the opinion that the man was no doubt relishing being at the centre of the town's latest excitement and anticipating regaling all his neighbours with the scandalous news of the evening's events.

Jenkins too proved to be surprisingly helpful, and Nate's initial impression of a pompous windbag amended slightly. The innkeeper's wife cleaned and dressed the wound to Nate's head and, after a bite to eat and several cups of coffee, he was feeling something approaching normal.

Jim and the other men busied themselves readying the coach for their pursuit of Jonah and Lottie. Jenkins roused several of his own men and set them off in the direction of Whitehaven. Nate took time to pen a brief missive to the duke. With luck, the duke would get word to him on where Benham was taking Lottie. Wheatley seemed to have information on everything else, thought Nate cynically. Nate had serious doubts that she was to be taken back to Oxfordshire.

He recalled the Frenchman's chilling words and deduced that Benham's likely destination was a brothel catering to a certain type of nobleman. A place of that sort was most likely found in London, and the most exclusive establishments were located in St James's. Nate prayed that Jonah kept his hands to himself until he arrived there. He might then have a chance of intercepting them before she was hurt. He growled to himself. He'd rip Jonah limb from limb with his bare hands if he'd harmed her in any way. He'd do it even if he hadn't.

Soon he was in the coach and on his way, the cold silver light of the moon illuminating the road and echoing the cold dread in his heart at what he might find at his journey's end.



Lottie could not recall how she came to be in the swaying coach. Instinctively, she knew something was not right. With an effort, for her neck was stiff, she turned her head to the slumped figure next to her. No, it most definitely was not Nate. That pale blond hair and reek of tobacco, it could only be Jonah. She suppressed a gasp – best not let him know she was awake. Quelling her panic, she tried to order her thoughts, and gradually the scene at the inn's parlour came back. She recalled the drink forced on her; it had been drugged. Laudanum, she

was sure, having seen its effects on her father during his final illness.

She ran her tongue round her mouth; it was dry and uncomfortable. Dismayed, she saw her shaking hands were tied together with a piece of linen cloth, someone's cravat, probably her cousin's. Glancing again in Jonah's direction to check he was still sleeping, her lips curled in disgust. His mouth was open, and a rivulet of saliva dribbled from one corner. She edged further away.

Gradually her breathing slowed and she calmed a little, but she still felt wretched. She raised her hands to her face and winced. The Frenchman must have bruised her when he'd forced the glass to her mouth. The memory of it made her angry. If only she'd fought harder! Nate's face flashed through her mind, and her heart lurched. What had happened to him? Had he encountered Jonah and his companions? The image of Dubois with the pistol swam before her eyes, and icy fear shot through her. She sent up a silent prayer that he might be unharmed. She was certain that if he lived, he'd do his utmost to find her. But if he was dead? Well, it was up to her to escape this fix and bring his killers to justice.

Her mind raced. It was imperative she avoid being drugged again, or any chance of escape would disappear. Perhaps if she feigned the drug's effects, convincing her cousin that the Frenchman had overdosed her, would that work? No harm in trying. Satisfied that she had some sort of plan, she lay immobile, pulse racing and stomach churning, waiting for her cousin to stir, but dreading when he would do so. Her life might depend on her acting abilities.

The coach rumbled on through the countryside. As grey light filtered through the windows, heralding the start of the new day, Jonah stirred. Lottie clamped her eyes shut and gave out a low groan. The cushions of the seat shifted as he straightened up. She suppressed her panic when she felt his hand on her shoulder and allowed her eyelids to flicker open before rolling her eyes backwards. With any luck, in the dim light he would not be able to tell when her pupils were no longer constricted. She risked groaning again.

'Stupid bitch!' he rasped.

It took all her control not to flinch, but she forced herself to remain quiescent and listened to his ramblings; he sounded to be still in his cups. 'If you hadn't run away, I'd have been saved a great deal of trouble. I'd have got my hands on your money, and you'd have been safely tucked away.' There were sounds of a bottle being uncorked followed by slurping. 'The meeting with Dubois would not have been discovered. Now... on the run... thanks to you. Harlot!' He giggled. 'Well, you will be one in truth soon enough.' His slurred words sent a shiver down her spine. She hoped he felt as ill as she did.

He was becoming maudlin and she didn't quite understand all he said. 'Poor Basil, why'd you have to hit him with that poker? No reason at all, bitch. Still... Dubois finished him off... had to... said he had no option. But all the same... your major will get the blame.' Another snigger. Then a sigh. Soon, his snores filled the carriage.

She must have drifted off to sleep again, for the next thing she knew, she was being rudely shaken. How long had she been asleep? Jonah was leaning over her, his breath unpleasant on her face. She kept her eyes lowered, but beneath her lashes she saw his face was set in a snarl.

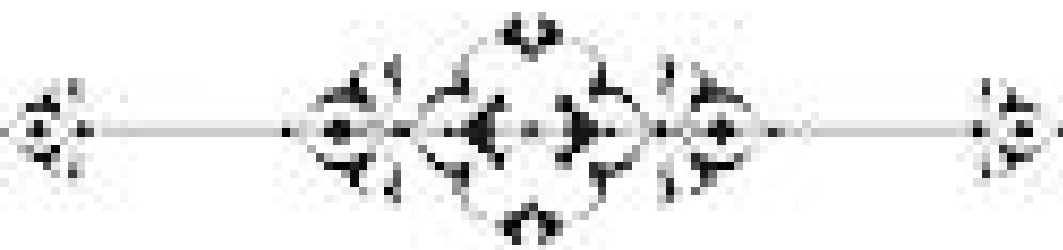
‘Get up,’ he growled. ‘We’re stopping to change horses and then we travel on. No tricks mind, or you’ll be sorry. You’ll not get away from me this time.’

He bundled her roughly out of the coach door into the waiting grasp of a sturdily built, middle-aged woman. Lottie surmised she was one of the inn’s serving women; the bulging muscles in her arms were clear evidence that she was able to change a barrel or two. Lottie decided to bide her time. It would be no good making a bid for freedom when the odds were clearly stacked against her.

‘Come along dear,’ the woman cajoled as she pushed Lottie forward towards a ramshackle building adjacent to the inn. ‘Your guardian said you were a bit lively, but you don’t seem no bother to me. He’ll soon have you settled in your new place. He told me it’s just the thing for someone like you who’s not quite right in the head. In you go, dearie, I’ll be right outside.’ The woman deftly slipped off the tie from Lottie’s wrists and pushed her inside. A quick glance at the tiny window told Lottie that she would not get out that way.

Never mind, there were sure to be other inns along the way. She would just have to be patient.

# Chapter 17



AFTER SEVERAL AGONISING HOURS on the road heading south, Nate's certainty that he had lost his quarry grew. At each inn and toll they'd come to after Kendal, there'd been no word of Jonah's coach or anyone matching his or Lottie's descriptions.

Cold fear gnawed at Nate's insides, and his frustration increased with each mile. He was tortured with mental images of Lottie, and with wondering what Jonah was doing to her. He ruefully understood what the effect of these anguished thoughts would be. The black despair that would descend to crush him, as it had on the ship home from the Peninsula. This time there was no Archie to get him through it, no loving father to give him the peace and support he needed. He would have to deal with it alone.

Dredging his mind for something helpful, Lottie's face swam before his eyes. He would not let her down. If a slip of a girl could be brave, as she undoubtedly had been, leaving her home to strike out alone, then he could fight his demons to save her. His resolve strengthened. The soldier inside him ordered him to think strategically. What would he do to evade pursuers? He focussed, concentrating hard for several moments as the coach continued to rock and sway southwards. Satisfied at last that he had the beginnings of an idea, he signalled the coachman to pull up.

Nate leaned out of the window to speak, as Jim and his companion drew up to discover why they were stopping. 'I think we've been humbugged, lads. I don't think our quarry is on this road at all, or we should have overtaken them by now. The ostler I spoke to at Penrith told me that Jonah's horses were only hacks, so he would not have got this far without us overtaking him.' He was pretty certain that was the case. 'As we have seen no sign of Jonah or his coach, I can only conclude that they did not come this way.'

'P'raps they went east, sir. That would get them over to Boroughbridge, then they'd be on the Great North Road – that's if they're going to London,' suggested Jim, lifting his hat off to swipe at his sweat-glistened face. They'd ridden hard since leaving Penrith, and Nate was acutely aware that the men were tired, having only had a few hours' rest in the last twenty-four hours.

Something like relief flooded through Nate's body at Jim's words. His spirits lifted. It made sense. Jonah was heading for London, and taking that route would be logical for someone trying to evade and confuse a pursuer. Hampered by his lack of knowledge about this part of the country, he had been unable to fathom it.

'Aye,' added Tom the coachman, turning in his seat. 'That could be right. It's a harder route for them, but mayhap they thought it would put us off the scent. We could carry on south going through Settle, then over to Skipton and p'raps pick them up at Harrogate. It's a run I've done before for the duke. The road from Skipton to Harrogate is not too bad.'

Nate rubbed his chin and considered the coachman's words that had echoed his own thoughts. London was definitely Jonah's ultimate destination. He made his decision: they would cut across country and head towards the Great North Road. His jaw clenched. Jonah was not going to escape him. He'd catch that blackguard if it was the last thing he did.

'Right, men, Skipton it is,' he ordered. 'But we'll stop at the next inn for a rest and some food. You've all ridden hard these last couple of days, you need a respite.' A meal and a rest could make the world of difference to a soldier's morale, and Nate knew he'd asked a lot of these men – men who didn't owe their loyalty to him, but to Wheatley.

'Begging your pardon, Major.' It was Jim who spoke. 'His Grace has a property just outside Bolton Abbey, we could change horses there. Maybe get some extra men to help find Miss Benham. We can't let that man get away with taking her, can we lads? Such a nice young lady.' The other men nodded in agreement. Nate was touched by their concern. He obviously wasn't the only one to be captivated by Lottie.

He managed a grin. 'It seems Wheatley has properties just about everywhere, which is indeed fortunate in our present circumstances. I will take your advice, but I insist we stop to eat at the next inn.' He raised his arm, as if leading a charge. 'Right, let's be off.'



It was getting on for four o'clock the next day when Nate and his companions arrived in Wetherby. They'd halted at the duke's lodge near Bolton Abbey and picked up fresh horses and a couple more outriders. Nate had also taken the

opportunity to send further word to Wheatley of their circumstances, giving no hint of the suspicions he harboured that he and Lottie had been used as pawns. He'd leave that reckoning for another day.

The first inn they came to in Wetherby was the Angel, one of the town's two posting inns. Again, it was the same story – no-one fitting Jonah's description, travelling south with a young woman, had been through in the last week. Nate left one of the men stationed in the taproom, to keep his eyes and ears open. The place was busy as the London mail coach had just pulled in.

Tired of being cooped up in a coach, Nate was now riding. His leg had improved since leaving Penrith, despite Jonah's bludgeoning, and he somehow felt more in control when in the saddle. The empty coach followed as he and Jim headed up the high street to the next inn, the Dog and Swan.

Jim brought his horse in step with Nate's mount and leaned over. 'Whole town belongs to the Duke of Devonshire, you know?' he said. 'His Grace has tried several times to purchase properties here, but Devonshire won't budge.'

Nate arched an eyebrow. 'You mean this is one of the few places your master does not own property?'

'Aye, His Grace owns many properties, and I've been to a fair few of them.' Jim missed the ironic tone of Nate's question.

Clattering over the cobbles, they entered the Dog and Swan's yard. Nate dismounted, handed the reins to the waiting ostler, and with his cane in one hand, headed towards the taproom. Jim lingered behind to oversee the unloading of the ducal coach, which was just pulling into the courtyard. The appearance of such a fine equipage brought the innkeeper rushing to the door.

He shot Nate a quizzical look, as if uncertain who he was addressing, then bowed. 'My lord? May I welcome you to my establishment and say how honoured I am to have your custom?'

Nate decided not to disabuse the man of his incorrect assumptions. 'Thank you, I'd like a private parlour and possibly a room for the night. But first, I have a few questions.'

'Of course, my lord. How may I be of assistance?' The welcoming smile had all but been erased from the man's face, to be replaced by a look of concern, as he led Nate through the passageway to a small, pleasantly furnished parlour.

Some minutes later Nate chuckled to himself as the obsequious innkeeper finally left him in sole possession of the parlour. He didn't feel the least bit guilty about trading on his connections to Wheatley and had emphasised to the landlord how upset the duke would be if the people being sought slipped past Wetherby and on to London. The cringing landlord had been insistent that no persons matching the descriptions of Jonah or Lottie had stopped at his establishment. 'But I will let you know if anyone as you describe calls here, you can be sure, Major Crawford,' he assured, bowing himself out of Nate's presence.

Seconds later the door opened again, causing an exasperated Nate to wonder what on earth the landlord wanted now. It was Jim, however, who appeared,



dragging his hat off as he moved towards the fire, where Nate was leaning against the mantelpiece.

Jim stretched out his hands towards the warming flames and turned sleep-shadowed eyes to Nate. 'Major, I've questioned all the ostlers and stablehands, no-one's seen sight nor sound of Miss Benham. The lads and I want to know what your instructions are; do you want us to travel on, sir?' He gave no other sign of the exhaustion Nate knew he must be feeling. Nate himself was bone weary, despite their brief stop the previous day at Bolton Abbey.

Deciding there was nothing to be gained by travelling further that evening, Nate came to a decision. 'I think we ought to stay here the night. I'm doubtful that Miss Benham's abductor got this far. You and the men get yourselves fed and sort out accommodation. Arrange a watch to be kept through the night. I'll take the last four hours before dawn.'

'Very good, sir. There's room for us over the stables, I'll let the men know they can settle in. I'll come and fetch you around two of the clock then.' Jim touched his forelock and turned to leave the room, adding, 'Don't worry, sir. We'll get them.'

If only he could be that sure. Nate turned and gazed into the flickering flames, images of a terrified Lottie dancing before his eyes.



Lottie, at that very moment, was feeling anything but terrified. She was furious.

She had managed to keep up the pretence that she was still under the influence of the drug for some time. But it seemed Jonah was not taking any chances. Her heart flipped when he suddenly attempted to force more of the liquid down her throat. She avoided swallowing it immediately and the coach had fortuitously rolled over a pothole as Jonah was about to grab her nostrils. He was flung over to the other side of the carriage and landed awkwardly on the opposite seat. While he was preoccupied, Lottie jerked her head round and spat the liquid down the side of the cloak enveloping her, hoping that the damp patch would not be too apparent. The cloak, presumably Basil's, smelt of stale tobacco and sweat. Not pleasant, but it was keeping her warm, and Basil certainly didn't need it now. She shuddered at the memory of the sound his head had made on meeting the stone tiles of the fireplace.

Jonah cursed again, and she made a pretence of choking and coughing. Would

that convince him she'd swallowed? He made no further effort to force any more down her. Instead, he started to talk, alternately berating her and then outlining his plans on reaching London. Her low opinion of his character sank even lower as she listened to his ramblings. How on earth had her uncle sired two such dissimilar people as Jonah and dear Ned? And why had Ned been taken, and Jonah left to enjoy life? It really wasn't fair.

Curiously, Jonah made no mention of Nate. Surely he would have taunted her with Nate's demise if it had been effected? As the hours passed, therefore, Lottie held on to a glimmer of hope that Nate might still rescue her. She inwardly debated the possibilities. The coach she was in was slow and cumbersome, its suspension nowhere near as luxurious as the duke's splendid vehicle, and its horses not high-stepping thoroughbreds. With luck, Nate would catch up with them before they reached London.

But as the miles went by and no sign of help appeared, Lottie was forced to concede that perhaps something awful had happened, and she might need to take matters into her own hands.

At each brief inn stop, Jonah insisted on them only staying for as long as it took to use the conveniences. Food was purchased to be eaten on the coach. Lottie's mouth had drooled at the smell of the hot meat pies that Jonah consumed but she knew she couldn't give any sign of being fully aware of her circumstances. At each stop she had managed to persuade each maidservant tasked with accompanying her to the necessary, to fetch her some drinking water. One had even brought her a little bread, which she gobbled down before returning to the coach.



It was in the very early hours that the coach slowed and turned into yet another inn yard. She knew it was going to be now or never – any longer, and she'd be too weak from lack of food to run very far. She lay against the squabs, eyes closed, as Jonah roused himself to follow his usual routine. He'd leave her tied up while he found a maidservant to take her to the necessary. It never took him more than a few minutes, so she had to move quickly. At the last stop, she'd been able to slacken the ties around her wrists. With luck, she would be able to free her hands, get out of the carriage, and find somewhere to hide.

She held her breath as Jonah stumbled out of the carriage. His shouts to the

ostler carried back to her. 'You man, fetch me a serving woman, I have a female relative here who requires assistance.'

She took a peek under the leather blind covering the window. In the dim light given off by the lone lantern hanging outside the inn's doorway, she caught sight of Jonah disappearing into the taproom. He was becoming negligent. His normal habit had been to wait for a serving maid to appear before leaving her to see to his own needs. Obviously, he believed she was still well drugged.

Lottie felt rather than heard the coach driver dismount from his station on the box; the coach swayed from side to side with his movement. She heard him chatting to the ostler. 'Rum do, this is,' he croaked. 'Be glad when I'm back on my own stamping ground. Don't like this fellow above half. Lady he's with is mad, he says.'

'You don't say? I thought all females be mad,' chuckled a second voice.

'You're right there, matey. Come on my lovelies.' The voices faded as the two men led the now-unhitched horses into the stables, to be exchanged for fresh ones. Lottie knew this was her opportunity.

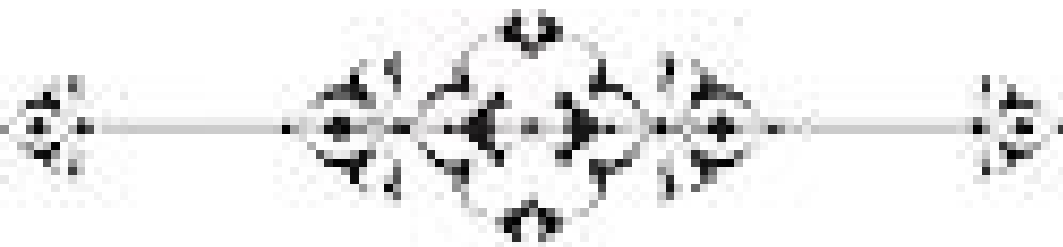
Swiftly, she slid across to the door facing away from the inn's main entrance. She grasped the handle awkwardly – having both hands tied made it difficult. The handle was stiff but to her relief it moved. She pushed hard, straining every exhausted muscle, and the door flew open. Her eyes swept over the dark, deserted yard. This was it. Heart beating like a drum, she stepped down, feeling for the ground. The cobbles met her thin shoes at last. It was a bit of an effort, but she'd managed. She stumbled across the innyard, heading for the dark archway that gave entrance to the street beyond. She needed to keep to the shadows. All the while she worked at her bonds until, at last, they slipped off her hands and she was free.

Something scuttled away from her feet, and she stifled her impulse to cry out. A rat was nothing compared to Jonah, she told herself. She'd just about made it to the end of the archway and was contemplating which way to turn, when an arm clamped round her shoulders and pulled her towards the wall. A man's gloved hand covered her mouth. She felt sick.

*Oh God, not again!*

She turned and raised her knee in a swift movement, making firm contact with her assailant's crotch. Immediately, his grip loosened and, groaning in agony, he collapsed in a heap. Without a moment's hesitation she sprinted away... through the arch to the road, and a quick glimpse each way before vanishing into the darkness.

# Chapter 18



NATE RECKONED IT WAS now three hours past midnight as he momentarily stopped pacing up and down the Dog and Swan's yard. The hours seemed to crawl by. He'd been unable to sleep, even though he'd been given the inn's best room and assured it was the landlord's most comfortable bed. As far as he was concerned, he might as well have been wrapped in his cloak on the ground somewhere in Portugal for all the good it did him. He'd welcomed the scratch on the door that signalled it was his turn to go on watch.

Gazing up at the ink-dark sky, anguished thoughts crowded his head. Where was Lottie? Why couldn't he have taken more care of her? It was all his fault. He'd let her down. If he ever found her again, would she forgive him? Unlikely. He commenced pacing awkwardly again, impatient for the dawn, when he would be able to resume the search. But which way should they go?

A noise startled him. A hunched figure lurched into the yard from the street entrance. Nate's army training kicked in as he reached for his pistol. He'd get rid of this drunk, send him on his way before the whole inn was roused.

'Ho, who goes there?' he barked.

'Friend, sir. I'm looking for a Major Crawford... have news for him.' The man's words were coming out in fits and starts. He was leaning forward now, hands braced on his knees, still gasping. 'Got here as soon as I... was able. I'm Ralph, Wheatley's man.'

*What the hell?*

Nate was suddenly alert, nerves at full stretch. 'What's the matter, man? I'm Crawford. What news?' he snapped.

'Sir... the lady... I've seen her. Couldn't stop her, she got away.'

Nate's stomach lurched. She was here? He had to find her. 'What? What do you mean? Where is she?' His voice was almost incoherent. He willed himself to calm down, be rational. She was nearby. And still alive, thank God.

'Saw her in the yard of the Angel. She got out of a coach, looked to be trying to get away from her companion. He'd gone into the taproom. 'Spect he's missed her by now.' The man's final words sent chills up Nate's spine.

'How long ago was this? Why didn't you get here sooner? Why didn't you help

her?’ he growled.

The man flinched at Nate’s accusatory tone. ‘Sir, I tried to... help her, I mean. But she kicked me in the tackle. Couldn’t do anything for a while, sir. Wasn’t expecting that.’

Despite his horror at what he’d been told, Nate almost wanted to cheer. She was all right! Alive and prepared to defend herself. She’d not lost any of her spirit. Now he just needed to find her before Jonah did. And then he was never going to let her out of his sight again.

Roused by the raised voices, Jim, followed by the other men, some still pulling on coats and fastening buttons, appeared in the yard. Nate’s head jerked round to face their bemused looks. ‘Sounds like they’ve arrived, men,’ he announced with a grim smile. ‘At another inn, the Angel. You,’ he pointed to the man who’d given him the news. The poor chap was now managing to stand upright. It seemed Lottie hadn’t caused him permanent damage. ‘Point me in the direction she went. Come with me, Jim. You and I will try and find her. You men, get to the Angel, apprehend Jonah. Call the magistrate. Anything you need to hold him until I get back. He’s not going to get away with this.’

‘Aye, sir,’ the men chorused. They looked eager for a fight. Nate almost hoped Jonah would offer some resistance; in return he would get a good pasting for his trouble.

Nate, Jim, and the others set off down the high street towards the Angel. Jonah’s coach must have passed the Dog and Swan at some point. Nate cursed himself for not keeping a lookout in the street itself. He’d reasoned that anyone travelling from the north would stop at the first inn they came to, and that was the Dog and Swan. But he’d got it wrong. *Blast it!*

It was still dark, and the small lanterns they each carried didn’t do much to light their way. Nevertheless, they swiftly negotiated the footpath, Nate giving his cane heavy use and cursing each time he stumbled when his feet met a pothole or other obstruction. Unsettling thoughts raced through his mind. How was Lottie managing in her thin kid shoes on this terrain? The early morning air was cold and fresh. Would her abductor have provided some sort of warm outer garment? He recalled she’d been wearing only a thin bombazine carriage dress when he’d glimpsed her lying unconscious on the dreadful night she’d been taken. He shivered in sympathy, despite his warm caped coat.

At last, they reached the Angel and the group split, one going into the inn’s yard, where there appeared to be some sort of disturbance taking place. Shouting and curses reached his ears. No doubt Jonah had discovered Lottie’s absence. Without waiting to discover exactly what was happening, Nate and Jim continued down the high street. It led to the bridge over the river. They passed houses in darkness, their occupants still sound asleep, though no doubt scullery maids were rousing themselves to commence their day. The pair stopped at each alleyway and Nate called Lottie’s name. He didn’t care if his noise woke someone, he had to find her.

At last they reached the ancient bridge that spanned the River Wharfe, taking the Great North Road on its way south. Nate was at a loss, there was no sign of her. Had she made it this far? He walked onto the bridge, peering across through the gradually lifting darkness to the other side. A lone carter, his wagon laden with goods, making his slow way towards Wetherby town, was the only sign of life.

Nate scratched his head in frustration, his eyes all the while scanning the banks of the river. It was an effort to control his escalating sense of desperation. Where was she? A sudden movement caught his eye, and he focussed at a spot on the town-side bank of the river, where some undergrowth seemed to be moving. He tensed, willing whatever it was to show itself, and hoping against hope that it was his elusive Lottie. His shoulders slumped as a fox trotted out, with what looked like a chicken between its jaws. With a growl, Nate turned to go back to the inn.

Jim, who had ventured further across the bridge, caught up with Nate as he headed back up the high street towards the Angel. 'Don't worry, sir. We'll find her, she can't have got too far. Besides, the young lady seems capable of fending for herself, judging by what she did to Ralph. The lads will enjoy teasing him about that,' he chuckled. Nate appreciated the man's attempts to bolster his spirits, but did not feel like joining in, he was too wrapped in self-recrimination.

Back at the Angel, they found all in uproar. The yard now contained a large well-appointed coach, the ducal arms on the side declaring its owner. Nate frowned. What was Wheatley doing here? He expected to face the duke's wrath for failing to accomplish the simple task of taking Lottie to Gretna and tying the knot. But then again, he had a few questions of his own for Wheatley. He headed for the parlour, where raised voices indicated that Jonah was trying to convince his listeners that he was innocent of any misdeeds. Nate drew himself up and strode into the room, ignoring the pain in his leg.

Jonah, alerted by the swivelling of everyone's eyes to the tall figure in the doorway, turned from the seated gentlemen he had been addressing, to point an accusing finger at Nate.

'There! There's the man you should be arresting. What have you done to my cousin, you cur?' he snarled.

Jonah's words bounced off him as Nate took in the scene before him. Wheatley was lounging in the chair at the head of the table, the epitome of aristocratic boredom, a slight lifting of his eyebrows the only sign that he had noted Nate's arrival. Francis hovered nearby, elbow on the mantelpiece, and the look of shock on his face at Nate's arrival turned quickly to one of impatience.

Francis stepped forward and held a hand up to stop Jonah's flow of invective. 'Quiet, Benham,' he ordered. 'We've heard enough of your lies.'

Seated at the table next to Wheatley was a portly gentleman, who Nate took to be the magistrate; he, together with all the other gentlemen crowding the room, turned and scrutinised Nate.

‘Ah, Major Crawford, my dear friend, what news?’ With those few drawled words, Wheatley dispelled any lingering suspicions that Jonah’s accusations were true.

Nate stepped forward and inclined his head in the slightest of deferential nods. ‘It seems Miss Benham has managed to elude not only her cousin but also everyone else, Your Grace. I’ve been up and down the high street but have found no trace of her.’ He turned to Jonah. ‘If you’ve harmed her in any way, you white-livered knave, I’ll see you hang.’

‘He will be hanged in any case, Major Crawford,’ came Wheatley’s soft purr. ‘I believe that is the penalty for treason and murder.’

There was a collective gasp from the bystanders.

Jonah’s face drained of blood. ‘What, what do you mean?’ he stuttered. ‘I am no traitor. And I’ve committed no murder, it was him.’ He pointed a shaking finger at Nate.

Wheatley examined his fingernails as if they were far more deserving of interest than the person before him.

‘What do you mean, Your Grace? Is this man a traitor? A murderer?’ the portly magistrate piped up, his chins quivering.

Wheatley waved a languid hand to Francis, gesturing him to come forward. ‘Heslop, if you please, search the fellow.’ Francis nodded and moved towards Jonah, who crossed his arms against his chest in an attitude of defence, all his belligerence and bluster evaporating.

‘I’ve got nothing, nothing at all. My lord, I must protest. I didn’t kill anyone,’ he whimpered.

‘Well, if you’ve got nothing, that will prove your innocence, won’t it?’ came the duke’s soft-spoken reply.

Nate, now a bystander himself, watched as Francis tugged Jonah’s arms down from his chest and felt inside his jacket. He pulled out a stiletto.

Jonah’s eyes went wide. ‘That’s not mine. I haven’t used it. I couldn’t.’ His whine tailed off into a snivel.

Nate spoke up. ‘He was instructed to kill me. He didn’t. I imagine it was his French friend who finished off the gentleman at the inn.’ He glared at Jonah. ‘Is that right?’

Jonah nodded, surprise and uncertainty showing on his face at Nate’s testimony.

Francis continued his search of Jonah’s clothing. ‘There seems to be something in the lining, Your Grace.’

‘It’s nothing I tell you, just some papers regarding my cousin. I put them there for safekeeping.’ The panic in Jonah’s voice was evident. Perspiration beaded his brow, and his eyes darted imploringly to the gentlemen ranged round the room, as if willing them to believe him.

‘Well, you’ve nothing to worry about then, have you? Rip the lining and bring them over here, Mr Heslop.’ The duke’s retort was sharp and to the point.

Jonah's face had turned an unhealthy shade of grey, and he was shaking. Francis took the stiletto and used it to rip the lining of Jonah's jacket. Jonah's moan was audible to all as Francis pulled out the papers that were secreted there. He passed them to the duke, and the wide-eyed magistrate beside him at the table leaned in to peer at the folded bundle of pages. Jonah looked as if he was about to slump to the floor, so Nate stepped forward to grasp his arm, holding him upright as Wheatley and the magistrate perused the documents before them.

'These are written in French, Your Grace, are they not?' said the magistrate, holding a quizzing glass to his eye and squinting hard to decipher the closely written text.

'That is correct, Mr Perriman. It appears to be a report on French agents located at various places on our coastline and...' Here Wheatley held one page up to examine it more closely. 'It also contains instructions for payments to be sent to them. Very interesting.' Wheatley looked up, his piercing eyes fixed on the quaking Jonah.

Nate's grip on Jonah's arm tightened as the man began to whine. 'I had no idea, my lord. You must believe me. It was Basil, he said we were just to meet up with an old friend of his, and that friend asked us to take a message back to a relative of his in London. You must believe me...' His voice petered out, as if realising his excuses sounded feeble.

The magistrate grunted. Wheatley continued to stare at Jonah with intelligent eyes. Nate wondered what he was planning. He had a shrewd idea that Wheatley was assuredly planning something.

'Lock him up for now, Mr Perriman,' the duke said at last. 'My friend Mr Heslop will search him more thoroughly in a little while. I'm not entirely convinced that our man here has given up all his secrets.' Nate saw Jonah's hand move to the stickpin in his cravat; it resembled a bird of some description. He made a mental note to mention it to Francis before he searched Jonah again.

Wheatley was giving further orders. 'Our overriding concern is the welfare of the young lady. She must be found.'

Nate allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief. *Thank God*. He'd been concerned that Jonah's attempts at espionage would distract everyone from what he considered should be their primary task. Perriman the magistrate gestured to a burly-looking man at the back of the room, who swiftly produced a set of manacles and proceeded to affix them to Jonah's ankles. Nate reluctantly released his grip, though he dearly wished to put both hands round Jonah's neck and throttle him till he rattled.

'Let's be havin' you, my lad,' Jonah's new gaoler growled. 'We'll soon 'ave you nicely settled.' He grasped Jonah by the collar and frogmarched him out of the room. Jonah's protestations were lost as the door slammed behind them.

Nate, feeling thwarted, turned at the sound of Wheatley addressing him. 'Take a seat, Major Crawford, you look quite done in. Heslop, pour the major a drink, if you please.' Francis moved swiftly to do as he was bid, and Nate, puzzled by



Wheatley's friendly tone, sat down at the table. He took the proffered glass and savoured the taste of the claret. The landlord had brought out the best of his cellar for his distinguished visitors. 'Now, where were we?' Wheatley continued as if the whole episode of Jonah's exposure as a spy had not occurred. 'You said you have searched everywhere for Miss Benham?'

Nate put his glass down on the table and answered. 'Up and down the high street and each alley along the way.' He rubbed his unshaved chin and was about to continue speaking when raised voices were heard outside.

All the room's occupants turned expectant faces to the door. 'You can't go in there, Miss. I'll have you thrown out. We don't want your sort in here.' It was the landlord. He sounded angry.

A distinctly female voice replied. 'I need to speak to the duke, you ridiculous man. Out of my way.' A scuffle was heard, then a man's yell. Nate leapt to his feet, knocking his chair to the floor behind him as the door burst open. A diminutive female stood there, rubbing her knuckles. Nate's heart nearly burst out of his chest. It was Lottie!

'Your Grace, I need to speak to you.' A defiant expression on her face, she strode towards a momentarily subdued Wheatley. Her face broke into a brilliant smile as her eyes landed on Nate. She swerved towards him. 'Nate, thank God. You're here too.' The warmth of her words swept over him. 'You're all right. I thought perhaps...' Her voice faltered, she shook her head. 'Goodness, I'm hungry.'

His heart melted, and he saw again the same slightly unkempt but beguiling young woman he'd encountered on that fateful day two weeks previously. A woman he'd vowed to protect and who had stolen his heart. He understood from her words that she'd thought him injured or worse. He grinned down at her as she clasped his outstretched hands and then glanced round, gradually becoming aware of all the interested observers. Her cheeks reddened as her eyes located Wheatley, whose lips curled upwards in a smile.

'It seems Miss Benham has found you, Major Crawford,' he remarked. 'I'm pleased at least one of you can locate the other.'

'I'm sorry, Your Grace, I couldn't stop her,' came a halting voice from the doorway. Everyone turned to see the innkeeper, nose bloodied and clutching the doorframe. Nate struggled to keep his face straight. To his intense pleasure, Lottie moved closer to him. He dared to put a proprietary arm round her shoulder.

'This is the young lady we have been seeking, my man,' Wheatley informed the incredulous landlord. 'Heslop, clear the room, there's a good chap.' Nate heard the duke's next hissed instructions, meant for Francis' ears only. 'Help the poor man and persuade him not to make a fuss, or it will displease me.'

Francis nodded and turned to usher the gawping bystanders out of the room. Once they'd departed, he grasped the landlord's arm and, muttering something in his ear, led him out of the parlour.

By this time the magistrate was taking his leave of the duke. 'Well, I must say,

I've never known anything like this. I am relieved you were here, Your Grace, otherwise that fool of a landlord might have believed that traitor's story about his mad cousin.' He bowed in acknowledgement to Lottie. 'Beg your pardon, Miss.'

'Yes, well, he is very plausible, my cousin. He'd convinced every other innkeeper between here and Penrith that I was dangerous.' She glanced round at Nate's stifled chuckle.

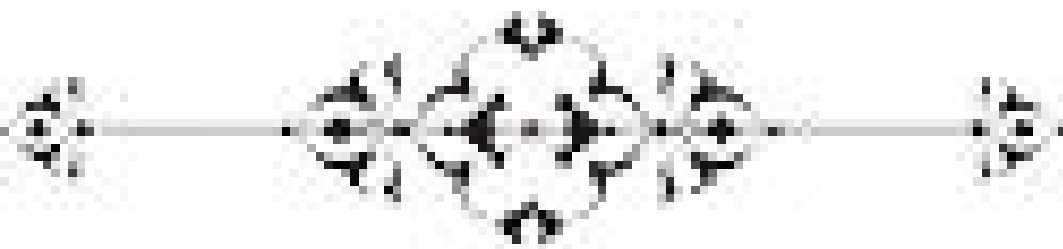
The magistrate tucked his hat under his arm and made a flourishing bow as Wheatley addressed him. 'I will want to question Jonah Benham further before I leave, Mr Perriman. I will send my men round to fetch him. He may have information that we should act on immediately rather than wait until he is sent to York Assizes.'

'As you wish, Your Grace. I'll await your instructions.' The magistrate departed.

'Well, Miss Benham, you have had some excitement instead of the simple wedding I'd planned for you. Come and sit down.' Wheatley patted the chair beside him. 'You can remove your arm from Miss Benham's shoulder, Major. I can assure you she will come to no harm from me.' Wheatley's eyes glittered with a secret smile, amused at his own joke.

Nate bit back a retort and wondered how long he should wait before asking Wheatley whether it was mere coincidence that he and Lottie had stumbled upon Jonah's rendezvous with the French spy.

# Chapter 19



SOME HOURS LATER NATE and Lottie were alone in the inn's parlour. Alone, except for the young maid whom Wheatley had insisted accompany Lottie at all times. Wheatley had also ordered the landlord to provide refreshment, and that man, eager not to incur the further displeasure of such a powerful patron and painfully aware that he had already upset him by accosting the young lady, had laid on a splendid repast. Lottie blushed each time the poor man limped in with a new dish. His nose now had a definite kink, and he was still not walking normally.

Keeping a watchful eye on the maid, who was seated at the far side of the room, engrossed in her sewing, Nate moved nearer to Lottie on the settle. It was the first time they'd been able to talk privately. 'Lottie, I'm so sorry. Can you forgive me?'

She'd been lost in her thoughts gazing into the fire when he spoke. She looked at him, incomprehension in her eyes. 'Whatever do you mean? You have done nothing to forgive. It's Jonah who should be begging forgiveness, certainly not you.'

'But I didn't take sufficient care of you. He wouldn't have got the chance if I'd looked after you better.'

She snorted. 'What nonsense! I came downstairs at the inn and the maidservant misdirected me. Are you saying I should have been locked in my room?'

'Yes... no, that's not what I mean. I should just have been there for you.' He brushed his hair away from his brow.

By his expression, she could see he was still blaming himself. That would never do. 'It happened and it's in the past. Jonah saw his opportunity and he seized it. It's more my fault for not putting up greater resistance. I don't know why, but I was unable to move. Paralysed with shock, I expect.' Her mouth twisted. 'Though I did give Basil a hefty clout with the poker. How is he, by the way? Has he recovered?' They hadn't done away with Nate, so perhaps she'd misheard her cousin and Basil, too, was fine. She looked up to see Nate staring at her, his mouth set in a grim line. She knew the news would be bad when he took her hand in his.

'I'm afraid Basil Montgomery is dead,' he said tonelessly. The room began to swim before her eyes and she gripped the edge of the settle to stay upright. 'Not by your hand, Lottie, please be assured of that.' Everything settled again; she was not responsible for Basil's death. Nate was still speaking. 'Your cousin and his French friend decided to finish him off. Jonah was also supposed to have killed me. I heard the man we know as Dubois order him to do so. He gave him a stiletto to carry out the deed.' She heard Nate chuckle. 'Thank God your cousin is a coward, otherwise I would not be here today. Jonah tried to make it look like I had killed Montgomery. No doubt he thought it would give him sufficient time to escape, whilst I fended off attempts to detain me for murder.'

Her mind was reeling. It was her fault Nate had been in danger; he'd have been killed, but for Jonah's cowardice. Unlike Dubois, he was not completely ruthless. She pictured Basil's body lying on the floor.

'How completely despicable, to kill a man when he is incapable of defending himself. I didn't like Basil at all, but did he really deserve to die like that?' Lottie shook her hand free and started to pace the room. 'I do thank God that my cousin is a coward. Oh Nate, you could have been killed, all because of me.' She could barely face him. 'I don't know what I'd have done. Lord, it's all my fault you are in this mess.'

'Now stop, Lottie Benham.' His sharp words brought her up short and she turned to see him stern and imperious, the complete officer. 'How are you responsible for your cousin's actions? We met because of your cousin, remember?'

'But...' she faltered.

He didn't let her finish. 'No, listen to me. I was not feeling at all well that day we first met. I was blue-devilled at the thought of returning home. In truth, I was about to retrace my steps and find a ship to take me away, anywhere. I couldn't face going home to live the life of an invalid. My father tiptoeing round my feelings, and our neighbours and acquaintances feeling pity for me. I was looking for an adventure, and I found one when you fell into my path.'

'So I'm your adventure?' she sniffed. 'At least I'm good for something.'

He gave her a wolfish smile, then just as quickly erased it. It was so quick that Lottie thought she'd imagined the look of desire on his face. Now he was back to his normal but distant self. The perfect and honourable soldier who only wanted to protect her out of a sense of duty. She decided to steer the conversation onto more impersonal matters. Speaking of emotions was dangerous; she might give herself away.

'I don't understand Jonah at all. Ned was not like that. These people that he is involved with are dangerous and desperate. They must be stopped. I wish there was more I could do.'

'How fortuitous you should say that, my dear.' Wheatley's words startled them both. He had glided silently into the room. Francis was behind him, a grim expression on his face. 'Please leave us and await your mistress in her room.'

Wheatley ordered. The maidservant quickly gathered up her sewing and scuttled out to do the duke's bidding.

Nate bristled. 'What do you mean, Your Grace, by "fortuitous"?'

'I mean that it is gratifying that Miss Benham wishes to assist in apprehending these villains who are trying to aid Napoleon's cause.'

'Yes, well, I'm sure she does want to help, but that doesn't mean she can,' Nate countered.

'I'll speak for myself, if you don't mind, Nate.' Lottie pulled herself up to her full height and gave Nate a quelling look, daring him to contradict her. She'd done with being told what to do. 'How can I help, Your Grace?'

'What? No, I forbid it.' Nate's voice cut in, despite her earlier admonition.

Indignant at this high-handed attempt to control her, Lottie couldn't help snapping back. 'I beg your pardon? Who are you to dictate to me? You are not my father, nor a blood relation. You have no authority over me.' She felt herself quivering with anger. How dare he?

'You are my betrothed.' It was an unemotional statement, but the intensity in his eyes almost threw her. 'I can't allow any further harm to come to you. It's my duty to keep you safe.' His words almost made her pause – almost.

'Consider our betrothal at an end,' she snapped. 'My cousin is no longer a threat to me, so you are released from any obligation.' There. She'd done it. Broken their betrothal. It was probably for the best. She folded her arms across her chest, daring him to speak. Inside she was trembling at her own audacity, but two days locked in a coach at one man's whim had given her time to reflect. She valued her independence. Disappointingly, the one gentleman she'd believed valued and respected her, now appeared to want only to treat her as a possession and control her. Keep her under lock and key. Besides, he'd never mentioned love, and she couldn't marry without love, on that she was decided. She looked at his eyes staring back at her, his emotions unreadable, his stance rigid, with hands fists at his sides. Her sharp words had silenced him. They continued to stare at one another for what seemed like an age.

'May I say something?' It was the duke. Lottie had almost forgotten he was in the room. She dragged her eyes from Nate and saw Wheatley smiling sardonically; Francis behind him was determinedly examining a framed print on the wall behind the door. 'May I propose that you both put aside your angry words? I'm sure with a little time you will be able to sort through your differences. Most marriages start with lots of little disagreements before both parties reconcile themselves to connubial bliss... or so I'm told.' Wheatley's expression indicated that these words were said with more than a touch of irony. 'There's no need to break your betrothal... that is, unless you truly find the idea of marriage to Major Crawford repugnant, Miss Benham.'

His tone irritated and angered her. Her reply came out more vehemently than was polite. 'No, I don't, but I also don't wish to be locked up for my own safety and not allowed some freedoms. I've spent my whole life up to now being told

what I can and can't do. I am done with that.' She had to make all three gentlemen understand. 'I know it is generally thought that females should not want to go out much in the world, or think for themselves, but I do. I'm sorry, Your Grace, you must think I'm an unnatural female and not fit company for your sister. And Nate, I don't dislike you, but I cannot be someone's prisoner again. My father made one of me, Jonah has done the same... what you said, well, I couldn't bear it.'

Nate opened his mouth to speak, but Wheatley got there first. 'On the contrary, Miss Benham, I find you most refreshing. You are a resourceful and brave young lady. I would be delighted for you to call on my sister. Indeed, I think you would be a very good influence on her.' His eyes glittered with amusement. 'Much better than those silly, empty-headed young misses who seem to abound in society at the moment.'

She was so taken aback by this good opinion of her, she didn't observe Nate's narrowed eyes glaring at Wheatley. She'd been certain Wheatley was going to bring a peal over her head and send her on her way.

Wheatley strolled over to the sideboard and proceeded to help himself to the brandy. Over his shoulder, he continued to speak as he poured a liberal amount into a cut glass. 'But enough, I digress. Do sit down, Major Crawford, and take that glowering look off your face. Miss Benham will never have you if you continue looking like that.'

Nate sat down again on the seat he'd abandoned at the start of their set-to, looking very much like a simmering volcano, thought Lottie. Francis stopped pretending to examine the print on the wall and came over to speak to her. His tone was hushed, his words meant for her ears alone. 'I understand what you mean, Lottie. Or should I now be formal and call you Miss Benham, as you no longer wish to be betrothed to my friend?' He gave her a lopsided smile.

She shook her head. 'You are very welcome to use my first name, Francis.'

'I have to say...' He lowered his voice further, so she had to lean towards him to catch his words. 'I believe you are mistaken in your belief that Nate would treat you shabbily. He is not that sort of a man. When we were growing up together, I do not ever recall an instance when he imposed himself on anyone, whatever their station in life. He expected obedience from his servants, but would always listen if anyone had something to say. Don't forget, he has been in the army, used to command. So his manner may at times be brusque, but I do believe he will listen to you and take account of your feelings.' His tone became more earnest. 'I truly do not think he has changed in essence from the boy I knew, a kind-hearted, considerate boy, who offered friendship to someone who was snubbed by most of his peers.'

She was touched by his loyalty, but could she really trust that a gentleman would treat a female with the same respect and regard that he would afford to his male companions? Especially a soldier like Nate, used to command. She wanted to, so much, but the last few days had taught her caution if nothing else.

‘What are you whispering about, Francis?’ called Wheatley from across the room. ‘Never mind, do come over here, and you too, Miss Benham. I must tell you what we have discovered.’

Wheatley’s voice brought all three of them back to the matter in hand. Nate lifted his head up and propped his elbows on the table. Lottie was aware of him watching her as she took her seat opposite him. Her cheeks flushed with guilt at her harsh words. Her eyes had been on him while she’d been listening to Francis; he’d been repeatedly raking his hair and pulling at his cuffs. He was now looking quite deliciously dishevelled. She dragged her eyes back to Wheatley, who had a speculative expression as he scanned her face. What was he about to request?

‘I have a proposition for you, Miss Benham,’ he began. ‘If you would care to help me discover the identity of the person behind the spying ring, I will offer you the opportunity to make a new life for yourself. With a new identity, should you so choose. Of course, you may decide to continue with your original plan of marriage to Major Crawford.’

Lottie’s mouth opened in shock. Nate leapt to his feet, outrage on his face. ‘Now, what do you mean by this, Wheatley?’ he roared. She’d never heard him so angry. ‘You have already put Miss Benham’s life at risk by sending us to Penrith, where we accidentally crossed paths with her cousin.’ The look in Nate’s eyes was murderous. ‘Or was it accidental, Your Grace?’ Lottie’s eyes shot to the duke. Nate had just accused him of manipulating events. Was it true? Wheatley’s face was expressionless, his eyes hard and unreadable. She heard Francis’ gasp of surprise.

‘Sit down, Major. I will explain.’ Wheatley’s words were curt. Nate, accustomed to orders from senior officers, sat down, his back ramrod straight, and Wheatley continued. ‘However, please be aware, Major Crawford, it is only because I hold you in such high regard that I am giving you an explanation.’ Wheatley’s eyes swept over to Lottie, who returned his gaze. Her heart was pounding, but she didn’t flinch. Was Nate’s accusation true? ‘Bravo, Miss Benham, you do not look away. I guessed you to be a woman of backbone when I first made your acquaintance in Oxford.’ Wheatley examined his nails and added offhandedly, ‘I fear I owe you an apology. Major Crawford is correct.’

Lottie gasped. If she’d felt braver, she’d have slapped Wheatley across the face, duke or no. But she was frozen in shock. She listened as he continued to speak. ‘You were encouraged to head north in the hope of distracting your cousin from his purpose. By delaying him from his meeting with Dubois, you would have cleared the way for my men to set a trap. Unfortunately, as we know, Dubois landed far earlier than expected. Their rendezvous was already in progress when you arrived.’ He shrugged as if it was of not much importance. ‘And then of course he managed to abscond with you. A great pity, but you are here now and unharmed.’

*No thanks to you.* Lottie only just stopped in time from expressing her derision out loud. It was entirely by her own efforts that she had escaped. She cast a look

sideways at Nate; if looks could kill, she was sure Wheatley would be breathing his last. Fortunately, Wheatley seemed unaware that he was in any danger, or at least he gave that appearance as he continued to speak. 'I now have a proposition for you both, and I have promised Francis that this time you will not be unsuspecting pawns in your country's games of espionage. He was unaware, by the way, of my ulterior motive for sending you to Gretna, so do not hold a grudge against him, Major. Your friend did not play you for a fool.' Lottie saw Francis shake his head and Nate's acknowledgement.

'I would not ask this of you, Miss Benham, knowing what you have suffered, if it wasn't for the fact that our country's safety is at stake.' Wheatley's words chilled Lottie. 'It will take two people to undertake the task I have in mind. Two people who trust each other and who will work closely together, otherwise it will mean failure. I am offering you, Major Crawford, the opportunity to accompany Miss Benham, should she decide to accept the mission. That is, if you both think you can work together. As a team.'

'If I do not accept, does that mean Miss Benham will be unable to help you?' Nate asked. His question nettled Lottie. She was undecided; she'd just got through one adventure, unscathed, thank goodness. Dare she risk a second? Of course she would. She had to make reparation for Jonah's treachery and ensure that Ned had not died for nothing. She would do her part for king and country.

Wheatley's answer pleased her. 'Not at all, Major. Miss Benham is welcome to turn down my offer, of course, but if she accepts, Francis will partner her. I trust him implicitly.'

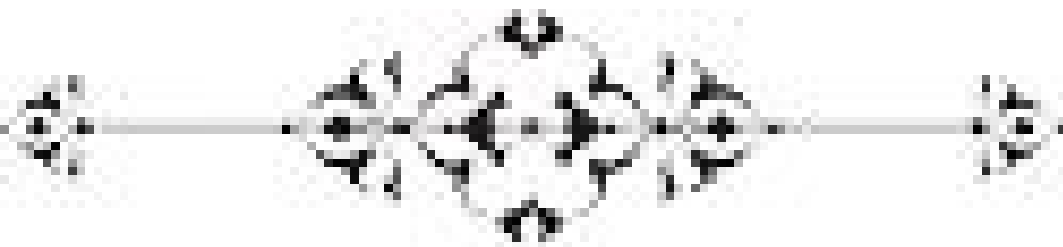
She saw Francis quirking a questioning eyebrow at Wheatley, who studiously ignored him. Nate's face was impassive as he appeared to digest Wheatley's words. The prospect of Nate refusing filled her with dread; much as she liked and respected Francis, he did not inspire the same trust and confidence. She held her breath, waiting for Nate's answer.

His tone was emotionless. 'I accept, Your Grace. That is, if Miss Benham is also willing to accept me in this endeavour.'

*Oh yes!* 'I would be happy to have Major Crawford accompany me, Your Grace. Now, what is it you wish us to do?' Her voice was calm, but her stomach was turning somersaults. What was she letting herself in for?



# Chapter 20



‘WELL, HERE WE ARE again, Lottie,’ remarked Nate, as their coach bowled along the Great North Road, heading towards London. Would she see his feeble stab at humour for what it was – an attempt to make amends for past mistakes? He’d made such a mull of things.

She lifted her head from the slim volume she’d been reading. ‘Yes, here we are again. Perhaps we can start afresh, put our angry words, spoken in haste, behind us?’ She fixed him with her eyes, the exact colour of which he’d never been able to decide. Green? Blue? Now they matched shades with a stormy sea.

‘I am very happy to start afresh,’ he agreed, his heart lifting at her conciliatory words. ‘I never intended to upset you, you must know that. I’m not the martinet you seem to think I am. Your happiness is my chief concern – whatever you decide to do at the end of our mission.’ He saw her smile, a slight one true, but a smile all the same. *A good start.* He paused, not wanting to speak further about the future, or rather the future after their task was accomplished.

The task itself was not without great risk. He’d had to force himself to keep silent as Wheatley had explained what he had in mind. Lord, the man was arrogant, but that was to be expected – Wheatley was a duke after all. Never had Nate wanted so much to plant the man a facer, but that would achieve nothing, except perhaps a spell in the Tower. Besides, Wheatley was Francis’ employer, and highly regarded by him. He would not spoil things for one of his oldest friends.

Wheatley certainly had more confidence in their abilities than he had in his own. Perhaps this would be a way for him to play his part in the fight against Napoleon without actually entering a battlefield. A solution and a salve to his self-recrimination... an end to his nightmares of failure and death.

He shook his head, recognising that he shouldn’t dwell on black thoughts, and focussed instead on Lottie, whose eyes had now returned to her book. ‘What is it that you are so assiduously studying? I saw Francis pass it to you as we took our leave. Is it interesting?’

She chuckled, a delightful sound to his ears. ‘It’s certainly verbose and quite floridly composed. It’s a poem, written by a lady. I’m not sure I agree with all her

sentiments.'

Intrigued, he thought he'd engage her interest with more attempts at humour. 'Do tell, a lady poet, eh? Whatever next?'

As he'd expected, Lottie rolled her eyes. She was deliciously easy to tease. 'Ladies are quite capable of writing poetry, you know,' she flashed back at him. There was a gratifying twinkle in her eyes, he noted.

'I agree, ladies are entirely capable of writing poetry, I was merely being facetious.'

'Oh. I thought...' She faltered, her cheeks turning pink. He loved it when she blushed. 'But that's beside the point,' she hurried on. 'It's by someone called Felicia Browne, and she exhorts all the sons of Albion to rise up to defeat Bonaparte.'

'Whatever could you find objectionable in her sentiment about defeating the Corsican?' he asked, truly wanting to understand. She would not have agreed to this mission if she did not want Bonaparte defeated, would she?

Her answer, when it came, should not have surprised him. 'Don't you see?' she said in exasperated tones. 'Why not the daughters, too?' He raised his eyebrows and gave what he knew was a sardonic grin as she continued. 'I don't mean all women should rise up and bear arms, but we can do our bit, as I intend to do.' There was fire in her eyes as she spoke. 'I might not be able to fire a cannon or take part in a cavalry charge, but I can use my wits to help find out who is the traitor.' She settled back into her seat, a belligerent scowl on her face.

She did have a point, he reluctantly conceded to himself. Besides, he'd seen women march with the army, just as brave as any of the menfolk. He unfolded his arms and scratched his chin before answering. 'I agree with you. My experience has demonstrated that females, when given the opportunity to act for themselves, behave with just as much valour and intelligence as men. Not all – but then again, not all men behave as we would wish.'

It seemed he had completely taken the wind out of her sails. Her puzzled expression made her look adorable. 'You truly agree with me?'

'I wouldn't say so if I didn't. I've never lied to you before, have I?' His words came out husky. He moved forward in his seat, hands on his knees – so close that he could touch her if he moved a fraction nearer. But he held himself back. He had his honour, he would not compromise her. If she wanted to leave him at the end of this adventure, then she would do so with her virtue intact, even if it killed him to control his urges. He watched as she clutched her hands together in her lap, the book now discarded on the seat beside her.

'No, you've never lied to me. You've always been honest.' She regarded him from below lowered eyelashes. 'I'm sorry I doubted your words, Nate. I know you are an honourable man.'

At that moment, an honourable man was the last thing Nate wanted to be. He wanted to kiss her senseless. He heard her breath quicken. Her lips were parted slightly – if only he could kiss them. He inched closer and she looked up, her eyes

hanging over his face. He could drown in her eyes. What was she thinking? If he gave in to his baser urges and kissed her, she would be compromised. He would be destroying her choices. He couldn't do that to her. He pulled back and settled into his seat, taking a deep breath in an effort to slow his pounding heart. He prayed his feigned composure would convince her that he was totally relaxed and not a raging storm of passion.

He risked looking over at her and saw her eyes cast downwards. Her hands were fisted in her lap, her teeth nipped at her lower lip, her cheeks flushed pink. Surely she was not suffering the same pangs of unquenched desire as he?

'It won't be long now till we reach London.' He tried to keep his voice emotionless. 'We'll head for the address Wheatley gave us. It is in a discreet part of town, so our arrival should not be noted. I'll then make my first foray to meet Jonah's contact.'

'I thought we were going to discuss matters and come to an agreement, not make arbitrary plans and just expect our "partner" to fall in with them.' Her sharp rebuke was entirely justified, he guiltily acknowledged. It was something new for him to share; he was accustomed to working alone, giving out orders and expecting to be obeyed. He would have to change. He saw a smile pass over her lips then quickly disappear.

'Don't worry. I'm only teasing. Of course I agree,' she said with a smile.

*The minx!*

He allowed himself to breathe again as she continued. 'I only hope Wheatley is correct in his belief that Jonah and this woman trust one another. If his loyalty to the French cause is at all doubted, then this change in their arrangements might arouse suspicion, and the consequences could be...' her voice trailed off.

'Fatal. Yes, I understand,' he said grimly. He would not permit himself to consider failure. 'But Wheatley is certain. He threatened Jonah with the worst sort of retribution if it turned out he was lying. As it stands, your cousin seems happy to co-operate in the expectation of escaping the noose. Wheatley can be ruthless when he chooses. Furthermore, he has a history of exacting retribution on his enemies. According to Francis, who was witness to the interrogation, Wheatley made the prospect of the noose quite attractive compared with the alternative he proposed if Jonah did not co-operate.'

'The man is a complete contradiction,' declared Lottie. 'I am still shocked by the way he tricked us into going to Gretna. If he had been open, I might still have gone.'

Her words shook him; would she have taken the risk even then? He looked at her determined little chin and the gleam in her eyes and knew it was the truth. Such a brave little thing. He was learning not to underestimate her. She continued to speak. 'Yet Wheatley is also capable of great kindness. He takes such good care of his sister and he has a very close relationship with your friend Francis, does he not? I cannot believe he is entirely ruthless.'

'Hmm. Maybe I'll explain things to you when all this is over, Lottie. But for

now, I think we can take the information extracted from Jonah as the truth.'

'Show me the seal again,' she demanded, leaning forward.

Nate reached into his waistcoat pocket for the small gold seal and fob, together with the stickpin shaped like a bird, which Francis had passed to him. Nate's instincts had been correct; the items were the method of identification to the other members of the London spying circle. Jonah had surrendered them after it had been explained to him that his life and limbs, not necessarily in that order, depended on his co-operation. He had also volunteered the additional information that so far, he had only made the acquaintance of Mrs Newbody.

Jonah had poured out the whole wretched story of his conversion to the French cause. Prior to becoming part of the spy ring, he had been involved in low-level pilfering, mainly from his own cronies. His name appeared on several debtors' lists, notably Tattersall's and Hoby's, and it had come to someone's attention that his pockets were always to let. That someone had reckoned rightly that he was ripe for exploiting, his greed for money being greater than his honour and love of country. Mrs Newbody had sounded him out on their first accidental meeting at a masquerade. She'd treated him to the free use of one of her girls. An occasion when, no doubt drunk and at ease, he'd spoken of his desire to make money and railed about the unfairness of being poor.

She'd then made him an offer of easy money. He was to travel to various parts of the country, make contact with French agents, and pass and receive messages. Simple. The trip to Cumbria to meet with Dubois at Penrith was just another task. The seal and stickpin were his identification.

Basil Montgomery was not entirely an innocent victim. He had got himself embroiled in the whole affair by dint of gambling. Like Jonah, he was a wastrel, but not quite as stretched for funds. Jonah owed money to Basil, mainly gambling debts. That gentleman, loath to let Jonah out of his sight until these were paid, was persuaded to accompany and even fund the trip up to Penrith on the promise of being recompensed. On the way there, he had expressed an interest in making easy money, and Jonah had easily recruited him to the French cause. For his treachery he had ended up dead.

Jonah had insisted to his captors that he was as shocked as they at Basil's murder at the hands of Dubois. Lottie was inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. His distracted drunken ramblings about Basil during her abduction from Penrith indicated he was suffering from shock.

Nate held out his hand. In it lay a small gold fob, the paste seal of which was engraved with a singular design. She took it from him, briefly grazing his palm with her fingers. A frisson of excitement went through him. He resisted the urge to clasp her hand in his and watched as she held the fob, carefully examining it.

Her eyes narrowed as she focussed on the design, then she looked at him and smiled. 'It looks like a bird. Yes, that's right, it's a phoenix, isn't it?'

'Yes, I think so. See, it is rising up out of the ashes. Though I'm not sure what the letters 'N. A. R.' stand for, somebody's initials I suppose. Wheatley is making

inquiries.'

She looked thoughtful for a moment, a frown creasing her brow. 'It seems a bit odd – I mean, to put one's initials on something if your identity is meant to be a secret.'

'Good point. Maybe it's a motto.' He was impressed by her deduction.

'Do you have the direction of this Mrs Newbody?' she asked. 'I heard Jonah speak of her.'

He swallowed. 'She runs a, er, a gentleman's club in St James's.'

A shadow crossed her face. 'Ah. A brothel, you mean? The place he intended for me?'

'Yes.'

'Well, we'll have to be careful, won't we?' She looked at him sideways, her mouth set in a grim line.

'We will be very careful,' he agreed. He knew better than to try and persuade her to change her mind. 'I will tell Mrs Newbody that Jonah is indisposed and still in Cumbria.' To lighten the now-sombre mood, he added, 'Perhaps he's been savaged by a sheep.' It worked, and she giggled at his feeble joke. 'Jonah has entrusted me, his close friend, to pass on the papers received from the French agent Dubois. He has also passed his dear cousin Lottie to me to escort back to London on his behalf, but I can invent a plausible reason for not handing you over.'

She snorted. 'Like what? Say you lost me on the way?'

'I could say that on the journey back I'd fallen in love with you and can't bear to be parted from you and that I've offered to recompense Jonah for your loss.' He held his breath. It was all true, apart from the recompensing Jonah part.

She was silent only for a moment. 'What nonsense, they'll never believe that.'

'I'll try it anyway,' he said in flat tones. 'Once I've given them the documents, they should be satisfied in any case.'

They both lapsed into silence, each engrossed in their own thoughts. Nate, slumped in his corner, was mentally kicking himself for his earlier words about love. Had he frightened her? The colour had leached from her cheeks and her eyes had widened as soon as he'd spoken the word. What did he expect? He would just have to see how things played out.



Lottie picked up the volume of poetry and made a pretence of reading, but the text just swam before her eyes. He had been joking, hadn't he? She was torn between wanting his words to be true and terrified they were. What should she do? She concentrated on her immediate future. Get through the next day or so and then she would give him her answer, as she'd promised. A new life on her own, or marriage to Nate? Both options had their appeal, but marriage to Nate would only work if he agreed to treat her as an equal, and more importantly, if he loved her. Lady Elizabeth had told her she was sure Nate was in love, but what did she know of love? She was just a green girl. True, Harriet had also declared that he seemed like a man in love, but neither had witnessed the scene at the inn when Nate had tried to forbid her from helping the duke.

*But he had capitulated*, her inner voice insisted.

That thought gave her pause. She glanced over at Nate, whose attention was now focussed on the view out of the window. In profile, his firm jawline and protruding cheekbones spoke of his character, strong and steadfast; he was also caring and thoughtful, she told herself. In his own words, he was no martinet.



Some hours later, she woke up with a start. There was an arm round her shoulders and for one awful moment she thought she was still with Jonah. She took a slow breath and caught the scent of sandalwood. Recognising that it was Nate, her panic abated. She was nestled against him, scandalously close. It was nice, he was solid and warm. She relaxed, seduced by the comfort of his body. Then reality broke through her thoughts. This would never do, she must maintain the proprieties or any choice as to her future life would be removed. She sat up and pulled away from him. Fortunately, he did not stir.

She straightened her hair with her fingers, trying to restore order to her now-dishevelled locks, as if doing so would also aid her efforts to order her tangled thoughts. She peeked out the window. They appeared to have left the countryside behind. Even though it was now dark, she could see that the area they were travelling through was more built up, houses, inns, and other buildings replacing open fields and trees. She felt a movement beside her; Nate was stirring.

'Ouch. Shouldn't have done that,' he groaned.

'Pardon?' she asked, wondering if he'd been aware that he'd been holding her close to him in his sleep.

‘Stretched my leg out of habit. Always do it when I first awake. Big mistake. Hurts like the devil. You’d think I’d learn.’ He chuckled, then added, ‘Excuse my bad language, Lottie.’

‘I’m not at all offended,’ she averred. ‘Your leg gives you a great deal of pain, doesn’t it? I’m sure I wouldn’t cope half as well.’

‘It’s not as bad as it was. It’s got much easier recently. I think I’ve had a lot of other matters to deal with that have taken my mind off my pain.’ He grinned at her, a wonderful heart-warming smile. Her heart thumped in her chest. She knew she would melt if he continued to smile at her in that way.

He lifted the blind at his window to glance outside. ‘I see we’ve reached London. Shouldn’t take long now. We’ll get settled, then in the morning I’ll go to Tattersall’s. Jonah’s letter to Mrs Newbody said his trusted new recruit would make himself known by waiting near the Fox. Of course, at the time he wrote the letter, he had no idea who Wheatley would send. I suspect Wheatley himself had not decided at that point.’

She frowned. ‘The fox? What is that? I know they sell horses and hounds, but a fox? How will you know where to find the right one?’

He slapped his good leg and laughed. Before she could be affronted, he started to explain. ‘Sorry, should have remembered you don’t know the place. There is a statue of a fox over the main drinking trough, it’s become a bit of a meeting place.’ He sent her a wicked grin. ‘There’s a bust of Prinny there too, but I suppose it would be considered treasonous to refer to it as the Prinny. Anyway, that’s where I am to meet. Mustn’t forget to wear the stickpin too.’

The coach pulled up in front of a smart townhouse in a respectable, but not exclusive, London square. When she asked, Nate told her it was Golden Square, home in the recent past to several well-known artists. Was it somewhere Wheatley used when he wished to visit London incognito, she wondered? Wheatley House, his principal London residence, was located in the very exclusive Grosvenor Square. Nate had told her he had been there once.

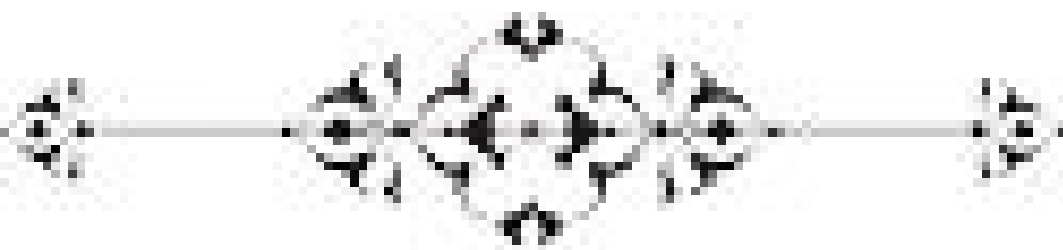
A liveried footman appeared to let the steps down and they were ushered into the house. Lottie was whisked upstairs by the housekeeper before they could discuss further their plans for the morrow. Nate was conducted to his room by the butler himself.

Lottie was shown to a very well-appointed bedroom, decorated in shades of blue and cream. The window shutters were closed and the curtains drawn, but she knew it must face onto the square. She ran her hand against the damask of the bed covering; it was far finer than anything she had in her bedchamber at home. But then, since leaving home she’d stayed in places that she could only have imagined previously: Nate’s family home at Willow End and Wheatley’s country residence Begley Hall, not to mention all the inns they’d stopped in during their travels. She chuckled to herself. She’d not slept in the same bed twice for quite a while now. If someone had told her that would be the case at the beginning of the year, she would never have believed them – Lottie Benham,

who'd hardly ever been allowed to leave home in her twenty-four years.



# Chapter 21



THE FOLLOWING MORNING FOUND Nate pacing awkwardly up and down Tattersall's yard. Every so often he would linger near the drinking trough, making sure his stickpin was conspicuous by occasionally feigning a yawn and a stretch. It was playing hell with his neckcloth, and he was beginning to feel incredibly dishevelled. Several times he'd been certain someone was about to approach him, but each time he'd been disappointed, as each likely individual had merely continued to walk past or greeted a fellow standing unnoticed behind him.

He was on the point of giving up and going home – it was getting on for midday after all, and his leg was aching like blazes – when he noticed a sharp-featured young man watching him from beneath the arches near the rostrum. From his slight build and dress, Nate took him to be a jockey. The lad, with a quick glance around, started towards him, his eyes fixed on Nate's chest, where the stickpin was prominently displayed.

The lad tugged his forelock and shifty blue eyes met steady green ones. 'A message for 'ee, sir.' His accent indicated he was from Cheapside. The lad reached inside his jacket, pulled out a sealed note, and passed it to Nate. With a deft action, he caught the coin Nate tossed him in return and stuffed it in his waistcoat pocket. Tugging his forelock again, the lad turned on his heels and ambled back across the yard towards the stables, thumbs tucked into his pockets. It was all over in seconds. Nate glanced at the paper and shoved it inside his jacket. He needed privacy to examine its contents, so he set off to find a hackney to take him back to Golden Square.

Once through the front door, he handed his hat and greatcoat to the waiting butler and inquired as to Lottie's whereabouts.

'Miss Benham is presently in the study, sir. Would you like me to sort out some refreshments?'

'Yes, thank you. Something to eat would be very welcome.'

He found Lottie seated at the writing desk in the dark wood-panelled room. She looked up as he entered, put her quill pen down, and gave him her full attention.

'You're back. What happened? Why the frown? Did something go wrong?'

‘One question at a time, Lottie.’ He withdrew the note from his jacket. ‘Yes, I’m back. I’m not frowning.’ He saw her wry look and amended his statement. ‘Well, possibly frowning. I’ve been passed a note. I perused it briefly on the way here, but we both need to read it. There are precise instructions about where we are to meet. Mrs Newbody is taking extreme precautions to ensure that the person she is meeting is indeed a close friend of your cousin and a convert to the cause. And...’ he paused for a moment, debating whether to tell her. ‘I’m almost certain I was followed back here.’

He’d spotted the shifty-looking fellow loitering at Tattersall’s gate and thought no more about him until, arriving at Golden Square, he’d glimpsed the same fellow, or his very twin, alight from another hackney on the corner of the Square with Lower John Street. The chap, no doubt guessing he’d been rumbled, had loped off in the opposite direction. Nate’s instincts told him, however, that seeing the same cove twice was not a coincidence. He was increasingly uneasy about Lottie’s involvement and the risks she was taking.

‘Look...’ he started, rubbing the bridge of his nose and avoiding her eye, ‘I’m not sure if I want you to be a part of this.’

Lottie stood up, her eyes a stormy grey. He braced himself. This was not looking good – was she going to ring a peal over him?

‘It doesn’t matter what you think, it is my decision.’ Her tone was clipped. ‘We had an agreement, Nate. Now show me the note, please.’ She held out her hand, and he surrendered the paper. He bit back the words he wanted to say. Why wouldn’t she listen to his concerns? She sat back down, seemingly surprised that he’d not pressed his point further. Nate watched as she read, saw her nibble her lower lip, her eyes narrowed in concentration. At last she looked up.

‘The Pantheon?’ she asked.

‘Yes, not the most savoury of places.’ That was an understatement, it was a den of iniquity as far as he was concerned. He’d been there often enough. He paced towards the fireplace then turned to face her again. ‘That’s one of the reasons I have misgivings about you accompanying me.’ She was not listening but reading again. A smile appeared on her face.

‘I see there is mention of wearing a costume. Does that mean it is a masquerade?’ She sounded enthralled. Good Lord, she probably was excited by the idea of a masquerade if she’d never attended one before. He was pretty certain she hadn’t. This was getting worse. How could he stop her now?

‘Yes,’ he ground out. ‘Still more reason for you not to attend. It’s dangerous enough, but there will be all sorts of low life on a masquerade night. Anonymity adds to the atmosphere of licence, it brings out all the villains. Lottie, please reconsider.’ He walked round to where she was seated, praying that, if he painted a black enough picture, she would change her mind. ‘I’d never forgive myself if anything happened to you. I nearly lost you once in Penrith, through my own carelessness. I can’t put you at risk again.’ He took her hand and gazed entreatingly into her eyes. It didn’t work.

‘What nonsense.’ Her lip curled in derision. ‘Jonah saw an opportunity and took it, that’s all. He is safely locked away now. You did nothing wrong.’ She squeezed his hand, turning the tables on him. ‘Nate, don’t you understand? I want to do this, I want to make amends for Jonah’s disloyalty. I am prepared to take a risk. If you have any respect for me, you will not try to persuade me otherwise.’ Her eyes held a glint of fire.

*Respect?* Of course he respected her – he loved her, could she not see that? But he was in a fix. Her spirit of independence was putting her in danger, but that same spirit was what had attracted him in the first place. It was an essential part of who she was. Who but Lottie would have been brave enough to run away from home in the first place? He would never have met her else. Who but Lottie would have managed to escape again when kidnapped? He knew in his heart that if he tried to impose his will, he would lose her forever.

Lottie continued to glare at him. He quelled his impulse to act the officer and issue an order for her to remain at home. Instead, he nodded his head. ‘Very well, if you insist. But we must plan this carefully and have a contingency plan. A soldier never goes into battle without reconnoitring the ground beforehand. Planning is everything.’

He was nearly bowled over as Lottie launched herself at his chest. He grasped the back of the sofa to steady himself. Her muffled words came from somewhere below his chin. ‘I knew you’d see it from my perspective. Oh, Nate, we will do this together and we will be successful, you’ll see. I knew I could rely on you.’ Her arms were now round his neck, her face buried in his chest.

He patted her gently on the back, when what he really wanted to do was take her in his arms and kiss her to oblivion and beyond. One blissful moment later she took a step away, as if suddenly aware that she had overstepped the bounds of propriety. He let his arms fall to his sides. Her blush was enchanting. Before another word could be said, the butler tapped on the door and announced that refreshments were waiting in the dining room. A lucky distraction for both of them.



The following day was spent visiting the sights of London. Nate reasoned it would be quite safe for them to keep up the appearance of a besotted couple. It was the excuse he intended to give for not handing Lottie over into Mrs

Newbody's clutches. More importantly, as far as he was concerned, it was the truth.

Lottie was demonstrably excited at being in the metropolis. She was in alt at all the shops, the fashionably dressed ladies, the tall buildings, the bridges over the river – everything in fact. For his part, Nate wanted nothing more than to spoil her. He'd been in low spirits the last time he'd been there, nothing exciting his fancy. Now he was viewing things through her eyes and wondered how he'd missed them before.

They visited St Paul's and climbed up to the dome, Nate being determined that Lottie should enjoy the view and not be held back by his damned leg. They visited the booksellers in St Paul's churchyard and up by Ludgate Hill. Then on to Bond Street by hackney, where he bought Lottie a pretty shawl. She had been reluctant to accept it, but he convinced her that if they parted, she could look on it as a farewell gift. He prayed it would not come to that. Nate then took her to Berkeley Square, where they enjoyed pastries and ices at Gunter's.

He didn't want their time together to end; he'd so enjoyed being with her, watching her face light up at each new experience. Was this all there would be? Would she walk away from him when their task was over? He couldn't bear to think of it.



The evening of the second day was the time appointed for their assignation at the Pantheon masquerade. Lottie was both nervous and excited. Excited because she'd never attended a masquerade and Nate had informed her that such entertainments could be quite improper. She was nervous at the prospect of meeting this Mrs Newbody. What sort of woman ran a brothel? Well, she'd soon find out.

Her eyes dazzled by the brilliance of the multitude of chandeliers illuminating each archway in the surrounding gallery, Lottie gazed around. She was drawn in particular to where the light reflected on the extravagantly painted ceiling. Close beside her, Nate held her arm in an iron grip, letting her know that there was no way he would allow her to be parted from him.

'This is spectacular. I've never seen anything like this,' she gushed, knowing she sounded like a complete innocent, but unable to curb her enthusiasm. They were being jostled from all sides as people entered the main auditorium to join in

the dancing taking place there.

Nate used his cane to clear a path for them through the crowd. 'Yes, it is quite something. But don't be too dazzled by it,' he cautioned. 'Many of the people here are no more than reprobates, so stay close to me. I suggest we do one circuit of the auditorium and then find a place to sit out of the way. Mrs Newbody should recognise my costume and will approach us before too long.' He peered down at her, his eyes steely. 'I have no intention of risking your presence here any longer than is absolutely necessary. I must have been a fool to agree,' he growled.

She grinned back up at him, thinking him far too serious. 'Well, I am here now, and I will not leave your side. Believe it or not, I do not intend taking unnecessary risks. But there's no harm in my having a little enjoyment, is there?' She gave him another smile and heard him clear his throat. 'Thank you for trusting me,' she added.

'Don't mention it,' he muttered. He smoothed the sleeves of his jacket and pulled back the domino over his shoulders to ensure the phoenix cravat pin was visible. Dressed all in black, with a pair of horns sprouting from the top of his silver mask, Lottie thought he looked devilishly handsome. She wanted to make the most of her time with him and to pretend that they were indeed in love with each other. When he looked at her the way he was looking now, she could almost believe he did love her. The spell was broken when he tugged her forward.

'Come on, let's do our circuit, show ourselves.' His voice was gruff.

Lottie moved with him. Yes, she was dazzled by all the noise and lights. People were talking loudly, trying to make themselves heard over the music played by the enthusiastic ensemble, banging out tune after tune. She was bumped and jostled about, but Nate's grip did not weaken. He glowered at a man who stumbled too close to her, pushing him away with his cane. She felt safe with him beside her. She glanced up at him and saw his green eyes behind the silver mask scanning the crowd.

A shiver of excitement went through her, realising the enormity of what he was doing, going against everything he believed in by allowing her to accompany him. She would not let him down. She, too, had secretly come prepared. She had a small knife hidden in her kid half-boots – she'd decided to wear those rather than thin dancing slippers. Another blade took the place of the busk in her corset. In her hair, pinned up in an elaborate chignon, she'd secreted several rather large hair pins, recalling how effective a hair pin had been when dealing with Jonah. They were also rather useful for picking locks, she recalled, a skill that Ned had taught her to alleviate the boredom of a long-ago wet afternoon. To finish, she'd donned a simple pale blue silk dress, having decided that any sort of costume would be cumbersome if she needed to move quickly. All this was covered by her dark blue velvet cloak.

The exception to this understated raiment was her mask; it was decidedly extravagant. Nate had insisted on its purchase. Made of dark blue velvet,

embellished with brilliant and brightly coloured feathers, it made her feel like an exotic bird when she surveyed herself in the mirror before departing. A phoenix. Ironic, she thought, it being the symbol of the group she and Nate were trying to destroy. Like a phoenix, would this outing be her ordeal by fire from which she would be reborn? But reborn as what? The same old Lottie who had dutifully obeyed her domineering father for years, or the new independent Lottie who enjoyed thinking for herself? Time would tell.



A heated twenty minutes later, they had completed their tour of the main hall. Nate found a secluded alcove with a table and, waving for a waiter to fetch drinks, he guided Lottie to a seat.

‘Goodness, I never knew people could be so uninhibited. Is it always like this in London?’ Lottie inquired guilelessly.

He looked away before he answered. ‘Well, that is another reason why I did not want you to come here tonight, apart from the obvious danger of course. Not all places condone such licentious behaviour, and you must not think it is usual.’ He’d never felt so uncomfortable; goodness, he was turning into a maiden aunt. Tonight he was appalled at the free and easy behaviour on view to Lottie’s innocent eyes. In the past he’d been too busy taking part himself, enjoying the free kisses and caresses that ladies, both respectable and not so respectable, cared to bestow on him. But, now that Lottie was with him, it was different – a torment. Wanting to protect her, but fighting frustration and desire to kiss and caress her. Aroused by her presence and the masquerade’s pervading atmosphere of licentiousness, he dared not act on his inclination.

At last the waiter returned, bringing two glasses of wine to their table, and Nate handed one to Lottie, who took a deep drink. Nate’s concern grew. He placed a hand on her arm. ‘Easy with that, we must keep clear heads.’ Hell, now he was sounding more like an aged relative rather than a suitor; when would he learn to keep his mouth shut?

‘I know, but I’m so thirsty. It’s very hot in here.’ He saw the twinkle in her eyes. ‘Don’t worry, I know to keep a clear head.’

‘I’ll order us some ices.’ He gestured to a passing waiter and bespoke two sorbets. ‘Though I’m sure they’ll be melted by the time they arrive.’ He was just about to suggest that they leave once their sorbets were consumed, convinced

and secretly relieved that Mrs Newbody was not going to make an appearance, when an expensively dressed woman moved towards their alcove. From the makeup on her face – or what he could discern of her face, the top third being covered with a black velvet mask – and the very low cut of her dress, he recognised her as a member of the demi-monde.

She flicked her fan open and began to waft it to and fro beneath her chin, all the while regarding them with an assessing stare, her dark eyes glittering and hard. The fan caught Nate's attention – made of ivory and black lace, it was decorated with a large gold phoenix at its centre. Surely no coincidence? His eyes flicked to Lottie. Had she spotted it? A shaft of fear went through him. This woman was no fragile female, she was hard, dangerous. She could harm Lottie. The woman continued to stare, her painted red lips pursed as she ran her eyes over him. In response, he drew himself up, inclined his head, and stared back at her.

'Mr James, I believe?' Her mouth formed a smile, baring her teeth, but she did not look in the least friendly.

'Correct,' he answered. 'And you must be Mrs Newbody. I'm here, as your note instructed. My friend Mr Benham has spoken highly of you.' He tried not to let his revulsion show in his voice.

'Yes, I'm Ruth Newbody,' she admitted, moving closer. 'I must say, you surprise me, Mr James.' Her voice, though cultured, had a throaty quality, acquired no doubt by evenings spent in smoke-filled rooms. He quirked his eyebrow at her, waiting for her to express the reason for her surprise. 'Yes,' she purred. 'I didn't expect Jonah Benham to have such a distinguished-looking friend. He is much less, what should I say... prepossessing?' Her eyes ranged over his body as if she could discern every muscle and sinew. He forced himself to remain still and at last understood how it was for a female being assessed for her looks.

Ruth Newbody's eyes narrowed as she got down to business; she did not hide her suspicion. 'Benham sent me a note saying you were acting in his stead, because he is ill. I'm puzzled he allowed a little matter of colic to keep him away from earning funds. Told me before he left town he was in dun territory.'

Nate decided to brazen it out. 'That's correct, he needs brass badly, but he was too ill to travel. A bad case of the flux, I understand. Could barely leave his room when I left him at the inn. Terrible stomach pains. Stench like a cess pit. Casting his accounts every half hour. He was not a pretty sight.' If he couldn't make Jonah suffer in reality, he would have his revenge this way at least.

'Oh dear, never mind.' Mrs Newbody's reply was the opposite of sympathetic. 'Yes, Jonah Benham is an old friend; we were at school together. We have a lot in common.' He lowered his voice. 'Besides, I want to see the same changes here as they have achieved in France. From what Jonah told me, helping you is the best way of bringing that about.'

To his disappointment, she ignored the bait he'd laid. 'Benham wrote that

‘you’d have some items for me. I see you brought at least one of them.’ Her tone was now curt, and her eyes flicked to Lottie; she moved closer to examine her. ‘Not bad from what I can see. Looks a bit slow-witted,’ she pronounced. He watched as Lottie gave a vacant smile, playing up to the impression she’d made. The woman continued, a calculating expression on her face. ‘Mind, that’s not a problem. In my experience men are not interested in what’s between a woman’s ears, their focus is on what is between her legs.’ She leered back at Nate, who was struggling not to slap her. Never in his life had he wanted to strike a female, but he would make an exception for Ruth Newbody.

Inspection completed, her lips curled upwards, apparently satisfied with what she saw. ‘We’ll soon have her working. I think ten percent was what was agreed? She should earn us all a pretty penny for a time. Is she docile, or will I need to bring my colleague to help remove her to my coach?’

Nate’s stomach roiled in disgust. He had to grip the table as the woman tilted Lottie’s chin upwards, to prevent himself from tearing her away. Lottie did not flinch, but her hands were clenched into fists in her lap. He could only imagine what it was costing her to hide her revulsion under the false smile pasted on her face. Reluctantly, he quelled his compulsion to violence; common sense told him to reserve his energy for when it was absolutely necessary.

The duke had insisted that the spy ring’s leader needed to be identified with total certainty before they could regard their task as completed. This woman could just be another messenger, a small cog in a larger wheel.

‘I have the papers, Jonah entrusted them to me, but there’s been a change of plan with regard to the female,’ he started. ‘Jonah told me of your plans and I have to say I was full of admiration. However...’ He flicked a glance over to Lottie, who, despite her vacuous expression, he knew to be listening carefully. ‘I discovered on the journey to London that she has... certain talents. Ones that I am not ready to surrender for others to enjoy. In other words, I’ve not finished with her yet.’ He folded his arms across his chest.

There was no way that he was going to hand over Lottie to the sharp-faced creature before him. She exuded pure evil. He also hoped that Lottie did not understand to what he was alluding. How would he answer her, when questioned about the “talents” he’d attributed to her? Now that would be embarrassing.

‘That was not the agreement, Mr James,’ came the sharp reply. ‘If it’s a woman you want, I’ve plenty for you to choose from. I’m sure at least one of them has the expertise you require. I’ve already promised this one to one of my most distinguished clients. Based on the description Benham sent me, I have promised her to Lord...’ The bawd paused and tittered theatrically. ‘Oh dear, discretion forbids me to name him, you understand? He thinks she will suit his rather particular requirements. He awaits my summons.’ She leaned in to Nate’s ear and whispered behind her hand, ‘Just think, Mr James, you are denying yourself and your friend a great deal of money, my client is a very wealthy man.’ Her breath was warm and unpleasant; Nate managed not to recoil. Satisfied that she had



made her point, Ruth Newbody turned to step out of the alcove. She gave an imperious wave of her fan. 'I'll signal my footman. She looks docile, but one can never tell.' Her eyes glittered behind her mask. 'Say your goodbyes to your paramour now, or you are welcome to come with us. As I said, I have plenty of females to excite your taste.'

Nate's stomach churned. He was sickened beyond belief. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lottie still maintaining her simpleton rictus smile, but sitting stiffly, her back rigid and hands clenched in her lap. To anyone other than himself, she was giving no external clue of the revulsion or terror he guessed she was feeling. He stood up, pushing his chair back. Lottie looked him directly in the eye and winked. Winked. *Good Lord, she's not terrified.* He blinked back at her and saw... determination and anger blazing in her eyes.

'Nate,' she hissed while Ruth was occupied in getting her manservant's attention, 'we must go along with this. We need to find out who else is involved.'

'I can't allow...' he cut his words short as Ruth Newbody re-entered the alcove, this time accompanied by one of the largest men he'd ever seen. He'd surely been a prize-fighter at some point. A broken nose adorned his face, and his right ear resembled a cauliflower. His footman's jacket was stretched over his massive chest, its buttons straining.

'There's no need for force. She will come without trouble, I've trained her well to obey.' Nate's words were short and to the point. If only they were true. The blasted girl was determined to have her own way. He was absolutely torn; one part of him wanted to scoop Lottie into his arms and escape now. If only he could move quickly, but his damned leg meant they wouldn't get very far. The other part of him was in awe of her courage. He couldn't imagine any other female of his acquaintance dealing with Ruth Newbody's plans with anything other than hysteria. He took Lottie by the arm, squeezing it to reassure.

'I've decided to come with you,' he grunted to Mrs Newbody. 'I'll hand the papers over then and see what wares you have to offer.' He leered in what he hoped was a convincing manner. 'Yours is a line of business I've long considered... investing in, if you take my meaning.'

Ruth Newbody gave him a knowing smile. 'Thought you looked a clever fellow, Mr James. Once this war is over, I might well be looking for a business partner. I'm thinking to expand. The London market is very lucrative and always will be, but other towns are growing, and wealthy men are the same everywhere, are they not? They can't all come to London for their pleasures. Well, not the particular sort I can provide.' She winked at him.

'Oh really? What sort of...?' he asked, playing for time.

'Now that would be telling, Mr James,' she smirked. 'Let's just say, whatever a man wants to do, or a wealthy woman for that matter, they can do it in my establishment, and no questions asked. I am the soul of discretion. Well, almost always.' She tittered again, hiding her mouth behind her fan. 'But everything comes at a cost, and as I supply the best, I charge the highest prices. You could

do worse than invest in my establishment. There are a lot of outings, but the final profits are always more than enough.'

Nate feigned interest, scratching his chin. 'Yes, I suppose. You provide accommodation, food, drink?'

'And the girls and boys, Mr James, don't be coy. It costs money to have people waiting for the stagecoaches, to spot a likely miss or young lad and reel them in. They don't all get handed to me, like you've been kind enough to do with this one.' She pointed a bony, snuff-stained finger at Lottie. 'Then there's the apothecary to pay, of course.'

Nate frowned in puzzlement, so she elaborated. 'Well, if they are reluctant, I give them something to make things easy for the gentleman. Though of course, some gentlemen like it when the girl is unwilling – will even pay extra for it. Once a girl is ruined, she has to stay, doesn't she? No place for her to go. Then if any of my girls get with child, I pay for them to get rid of it, otherwise they have to leave. So you see, it's not all plain sailing. But I have several income streams to offset costly problems like these.'

Her lips pulled back, revealing her teeth in another approximation of a smile. Nate leered back at her. Inside he was seething. That she could calmly talk about ruining innocents, drugging them and casting them out when they were of no value, revolted him. He'd known it went on, of course, everyone did. It was just a shock being faced with the reality of it. She had to be stopped. And what else was she involved in? Espionage, he knew, and she'd hinted about blackmail and extortion. The woman was spawned by the devil himself.

Apparently satisfied that she'd piqued his interest, Ruth Newbody gestured for him to follow her. 'There's nothing like money to persuade one to change one's mind about a way of life. Come, Mr James, and I'll show you. Follow me.' She prodded her man in the back. 'Lead the way, Dobbs. Clear a path for us through the crowd.'

The giant who was Dobbs nodded and began shouldering his way through the revellers towards the main reception hall and the exit. Ruth Newbody, certain she now had "Mr James" firmly in agreement with her, followed next, sashaying through the parting crowds and occasionally nodding to gentlemen who indicated they knew her. Nate noted that nearly all of her acquaintances seemed to be of the most dissolute type, wealthy rakes from their attire, well into their cups, and arms encircling the sort of females never seen in Almack's.

He pulled Lottie closer to him and by the rapid pulse throbbing in her throat knew she was agitated. He wondered if she could hold her own against the woman, should things become violent. She'd managed to subdue two men, but that was because they'd not expected her to tackle them. Mrs Newbody was a different kettle of fish entirely. Mrs Newbody's servant, too, posed a problem; my goodness he was big. But he seemed slow, addle-pated. Perhaps he could be defeated by wits alone. He hoped so.

With his jaw clenched and a grim expression, Nate gripped Lottie's arm and

forced his way along in Ruth Newbody's wake. Outside, a carriage awaited them.

A postilion stood with the door held open and Mrs Newbody stepped in first.

Nate bent his head to whisper in Lottie's ear. 'Run now, I can hold him off. You don't have to do this if you've changed your mind.'

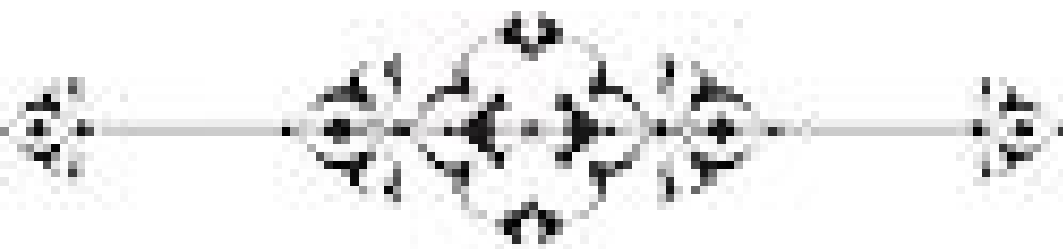
His heart sank as she shook her head. 'Let us see where this takes us. We've got to discover her location, uncover as much as we can. We've got to stop her.' She clamped her mouth shut as a voice issued forth from the carriage.

'Mr James, send the girl up, then get in if you are coming. I haven't got all night.'

Nate feigned pushing Lottie into the carriage. Ruth Newbody's claw-like hand stretched out to tug Lottie down into the seat beside her. 'That's a good girl. Do as you are told, and all will be well. Gentlemen like females to do their bidding, don't they, Mr James?'

Nate grunted. He hoped they were doing the right thing. It was too late now in any case. The door of the carriage slammed shut and they set off into the darkness.

# Chapter 22



IT TOOK SOME TWENTY minutes to reach their destination. Through the carriage window, Nate ascertained that they had travelled along Oxford Street then turned left onto Bond Street. The shops there were all shuttered and in darkness, though there were still plenty of people about, trailing towards St James's. The carriage crossed Piccadilly to Duke Street, finally bowling in to King Street in the heart of St James's. The wheels slowed, rumbling over cobbles into the narrow mews behind the large buildings that housed the gentlemen's clubs and exclusive brothels the area was famous for.

'I thought we'd best enter the back way, Mr James. We don't want everyone to know our business, do we?' Mrs Newbody smirked. The door opened, and with a rustle of her silk skirts, she stepped down from the coach. 'Bring the girl, Mr James. We don't want her to change her mind now, do we? Especially as you are likely to profit from her talents, if you decide to invest. Hurry along, gel. We'll soon have you settled and used to our ways here.' She gave a cackle, then added over her shoulder as she entered the open doorway leading to a dimly lit passageway, 'You might even grow to enjoy it.'

Nate clenched his jaw and looked at Lottie. She still wore her mask, but he could see her eyes hard with suppressed anger. Her grip on his arm grew tighter. To Nate's disappointment, Dobbs lingered; he was holding the door of the coach open, waiting for them to enter the house. During the journey, Nate had had second thoughts about the wisdom of what they were doing. He'd even considered making a run for it with Lottie as soon as they alighted. But Dobbs' looming presence, in addition to that of several other well-built, disreputable-looking personages hanging about, meant this would not be easy. In his current state, he wasn't sure he could manage it. And there was no way he was going to risk Lottie getting hurt.

He lowered his head to whisper as they walked towards the open door of the house. 'I'll keep you close to me for now, don't worry. When we get the chance, we'll make a run for it.'

Lottie nodded and, satisfied that she agreed with his plan, he walked with her up the steps to the door, his cane tapping lightly on each step as they went.

The passageway before them was dimly lit, and Ruth Newbody had made her way to the far end, where she stood before a large, highly polished door. 'I'll send for one of the girls to take her up, Mr James. You go on into my office, it's just over there.' She opened the door, which he could see led to an extravagantly decorated reception hall. The floor was tiled in marble, and a large chandelier hung from a central point, casting the light of what must have been a hundred candles over the whole space. A maid scurried about taking coats and hats from the gentlemen who were queuing to get in, whilst another member of staff, a man the equal in size to Dobbs, greeted each deferentially and led them to a doorway to the right of the entrance. Each time this doorway opened, the sounds of laughter and cheering escaped. Some of the gentlemen seemed to be having a very good time.

'If you don't mind, I'll keep Lottie with me a bit longer while we discuss things, Mrs Newbody, or may I call you Ruth?' Nate tried his best to look lascivious. 'I might just need, erm... one more time before I give her up. You don't mind, do you?' He heard Lottie stifle a snort and hoped it hadn't reached Ruth Newbody's ears over the noise in the vestibule.

Ruth Newbody pursed her lips and paused in her action of calling the maid over. After a few seconds, obviously deciding he was worth indulging for the money he might bring, she nodded her head in agreement. 'No, but not too long, eh? We need to get her prepared, and my client has been getting impatient. I promised him it would be tonight.'

She led the way across the entrance hall, cutting her way through the gentlemen who stood around waiting to be admitted. Nate followed on, clutching Lottie's arm.

'Crawford! I say, Crawford, didn't expect to meet you here. That looks like a nice little piece you've got there, even though she's wearing a mask. Mind you, I don't look at the face once I get started,' the voice chortled. 'Can I have a go after you?'

A cold shiver went down Nate's spine. The voice came from his left. He ignored it and hoped he could get to Ruth Newbody's office before she heard or before the person who was calling his name made any more of it. He'd felt Lottie pause briefly but, clever girl that she was, she too kept moving. Ruth now had her door open and turned to show him in, just as the voice called again.

'Oi, Crawford. Don't ignore me. I may be in my cups, but I know it's you. Look everyone, it's Crawford. Rescued me at Corunna. Damned fine officer.' A hand landed on Nate's shoulder and he turned to look into the bloodshot eyes and leering face of James Alderney, an officer he'd met just before the British forces had made a tactical retreat from Spain some fifteen months earlier.

'I think you must be mistaken, sir. My name is James, Edward James. I've never been in Spain.'

'Are you sure?' Alderney persisted, his voice slurring. He reached behind Nate to grab at Lottie's breasts, but she slid out of the way. Nate forced himself to stay

calm and not land the cur a facer.

‘Quite sure. Now please excuse me.’ Nate turned away to find Ruth Newbody observing him. He shrugged and tried to look nonchalant. ‘It seems I resemble someone he knows. He’s drunk as a wheelbarrow, probably sees two of me in any case.’

Her eyes still narrowed, Ruth waved him and Lottie into the room. She indicated a chair facing her desk. ‘Sit down, Mr James. Lottie, sit over there on the chaise. You can use that later to say your goodbyes... after we’ve completed our business, and before I send her upstairs.’ She didn’t quite smirk this time, but sucked her cheeks in, her eyes shuttered and unreadable.

Lottie pattered over to the chaise in the far corner of the room, her head bowed, a picture of obedience. Somehow, Nate knew that beneath her lowered eyelids her eyes were alert and observing.

‘Now, you have some papers for me, I think?’ Ruth’s rasping tone was beginning to grate on Nate’s nerves. Fuming inside at the way she had spoken to Lottie, and her disgusting innuendos, he reached into the pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out a bundle of papers.

‘I think this is what you need.’

She snatched them from his outstretched hand and returned to the other side of her desk. Taking a magnifying glass from one of the drawers, she examined the seal before breaking it, and then started to read the contents. Nate held his breath and prayed the doctored documents would withstand her scrutiny. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Lottie had also tensed. After several nerve-wracking minutes, Ruth Newbody refolded the papers.

‘These seem to be what we’ve been waiting for. You’ve done well, Mr James. Now, why don’t I go and arrange for some refreshments to fortify our discussions about you investing in my business?’ She inclined her head in Lottie’s direction, a salacious grin on her face. ‘In the meantime, you can have a little privacy. Is twenty minutes long enough?’ Without waiting for his answer, she stood up and put the documents into the drawer of her desk and locked it, tucking the key in her bodice. ‘Better keep these secure. Not the sort of thing to be left lying around.’ She swept out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Nate exhaled in relief. Their ruse had worked. He sprang out of his seat, disregarding the pain in his leg, and made for the door. He cracked it open and peered out. The entrance hall was still crowded with well-dressed men jostling and pushing, sharing jokes and laughter, impatient to be admitted. The doorman’s attention would surely be diverted enough for them to make their escape.

‘Quick, Lottie,’ he ordered. ‘We need to get out of here, before she discovers our deception.’ He turned his head, expecting Lottie to be right behind him, but she was nowhere to be seen. ‘Lottie, where are you?’ he hissed. Why couldn’t she obey orders?

‘Just a minute.’ Her muffled voice came from behind the desk. Closing the

door, he hobbled over to find her on her knees, a hair pin in her hands, trying to break the lock of the desk drawer.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ he growled. ‘We need to move.’

‘I know, I know. Just thought I’d try... ahhh, that’s it. Never thought Ned’s trick with the hair pin would ever be needed,’ he heard her whisper under her breath. She pulled the hair pin out of the lock, then drew the drawer handle towards her. He gasped as it moved out smoothly. She leaned back on her heels and looked up at him, her eyes sparkling and a satisfied smile on her lips. He almost forgot their situation and the danger, so overcome was he with the urge to kiss her. He pulled himself together.

‘Well I never. Your skills are endless,’ he choked out. The woman he loved was not only calm in a crisis but also a budding housebreaker.

‘Here, take these.’ She’d grabbed a handful of papers, and what looked like a small ledger, and thrust them into his hands. He stuffed them into the front of his shirt; it was no time to be neat and tidy.

‘Right, we must go. Now!’ he insisted, desperate to get her out of there. With luck, they could escape unnoticed through the busy entrance hall. Once out on the bustling streets of St James’s, they’d lose themselves amongst the crowds of gentlemen and the cruising barques of frailty. A hackney should be easily obtained.

‘Yes, of course, I’m coming.’ She pushed the drawer closed and stood up, smoothing her skirts. She was still wearing her mask and resembled nothing less than an accomplished and professional lady thief, if there was such a being. He went to grab the door handle.

Too late. The door swung open, catching Nate’s head and knocking him sideways. Ruth Newbody, hands on hips, glared at him as he lay helpless on the floor. His cane had fallen out of his hand and rolled out of reach. Behind Ruth, the hulking mass of Dobbs lurked. He did not seem too pleased either.

Ruth’s eyes alighted on Lottie and her lips curled. ‘Well, well, well. I know he is not Edward James, so you cannot be Lottie Benham.’ When Lottie did not answer, she continued, ‘Never mind. One female body is as good as the next in my line of business, so you’ll do in her place. If you don’t tell me who sent you, I can always apply pressure to your friend’s bad leg. Looks as if it could be causing him a bit of pain already. I’m sure there will come a point when he will be only too desirous to disclose everything.’

She kicked Nate’s bad leg with a force he could have envied in any other circumstances. He curled into a ball as the pain shot through him. Lottie rushed to kneel beside him and her hand grasped his, anchoring him to the present. Despite the excruciating agony, he had to remain conscious. He looked at her, squeezed her hand, and mouthed the word “cane”. She glanced round and nodded; it seemed she’d understood. Thank God for a quick-thinking woman.

Ruth Newbody’s voice cut the air. ‘Leave him be. You think you’re such a clever miss, pretending to be simple minded. By the time I’ve finished with you

both, you'll wish yourself dead, believe me. Dobbs, pick him up, take him to the back room, the one we use for the new girls. Tie him up. I'll deal with this one.'

As Ruth turned to speak to Dobbs, Nate saw Lottie reach for his cane, which had rolled under the desk as he'd fallen. She pulled it to her side and secreted it under the folds of her cloak. Dobbs lumbered forward and bent over to pick him up. Nate braced himself. He heard the swish as Lottie pulled the handle of the cane upwards to reveal the swordstick hidden within. As Dobbs bent over him, Nate reached to grasp the man's head, his thumbs gouging into the hulk's eyes. Dobbs yelled out, but gravity was against him and his weight brought him down with a crash. Nate rolled awkwardly from under him.

'To me, Lottie,' he shouted, and reached out a hand to catch the sword from Lottie.

But again she'd ignored his instructions. Eyes wide, he watched as she advanced on Ruth Newbody, sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. *Dagger?* He blinked. Where had that come from? Dobbs was still floundering on the floor, clutching his eyes. It wouldn't be long before he recovered. Nate scoured the room for a weapon. He clambered awkwardly onto his knees and made a grab for the large candlestick placed on the desk. Thank goodness Ruth Newbody had expensive taste, it was reassuringly heavy. He swung it upwards and brought it down with a satisfying thud on the back of Dobbs' head. He wouldn't be getting up again in a while.

Nate turned his attention back to Lottie. His stomach lurched. Ruth Newbody had a pistol pointed straight at Lottie's heart. 'You can't win, you know, you silly girl. I'll shoot you.' Ruth gestured to Nate. 'You,' she snarled, 'tell your lady friend to put down her weapons, or I will kill her.'

He was about to do as instructed when he heard Lottie answer. 'But you can only shoot one of us. Shoot me, and he will kill you. Shoot him and I will kill you. Believe me, if you do not put that pistol down, you will die by the hand of one of us tonight.'

Uncertainty reflected in Ruth's eyes. It seemed she had not expected that. To be honest, neither had Nate. He'd rarely encountered such bravado on the battlefield. Lottie resembled an avenging angel, her stance determined and eyes glittering beneath the phoenix mask. Ruth's hand holding the pistol wavered. Like lightning, Lottie surged forward, slashing the woman's arm. The gun went off in a flash of blinding light and a deafening bang. It caught the edge of the desk and the ball crashed harmlessly into a bookcase on the wall opposite.

'Quick, Lottie.' He grabbed her arm, taking care to remove the swordstick from her grasp, and pulled her towards the door. 'We need to get out, now.' That was an order she could not disobey. He pulled the door open, just as Ruth Newbody started to scream.

'Stop them! Stop them!'

A crowd of gentlemen loitering in the hall turned to watch in puzzlement as



Nate and Lottie exploded out of the door, Ruth Newbody's screams getting louder behind them.

Nate's mind raced. 'Gentlemen, have mercy. Madam won't let me take my little ladybird out of the house. You know how it is?' he grinned conspiratorially and winked. Some of the gentlemen sniggered, one or two looked uncertain.

'Didn't I hear a shot?' asked one.

The doorman was pushing his way through the crowd, getting closer.

Nate felt Lottie pull away from his arm. 'My lords, you wouldn't stop a lady from enjoying herself, would you?' Nate's mouth fell open as she gave a little wriggle and smiled saucily. 'It might be you next.' Those who had had misgivings now abandoned them.

'Only if you promise to come with me next time, darling,' shouted one.

'Of course,' she giggled.

Before they knew it, he and Lottie were surrounded by grinning, leering men, some rather free with their hands, it had to be said. Nate gritted his teeth, deciding it was wiser to ignore the insults to Lottie's person before the henchman on the door had a chance to stop them. The crowd of men, some of them cheering, formed a barrier round the pair, successfully blocking the doorman and shoving him out of the way. The door opened, and suddenly Nate and Lottie felt themselves launched out onto the street. Clasp hands, they raced down St James's, Nate hobbling on his bad leg as he struggled to keep pace.



Lottie, hearing his hard-drawn breaths, glanced at Nate. His brow was glistening, and his eyes were half-closed in pain, but he kept moving forward. She tugged him to a stop. She scanned the road up which they'd run. No-one seemed to be in pursuit, although a few passers-by had given them inquiring looks. Hands on hips, she bent over and puffed out a breath. She was shaking, not only with fear from their narrow escape, but with excitement. She'd never felt so alive. Was this how Nate felt when he'd come through a battle? No wonder he missed the army life.

She got her breathing under control. 'I think we're safe. No-one seems to be following. Are you all right, Nate? What about your leg? I could have murdered that woman when she kicked you.'

She heard him take a deep breath. 'I'm fine, honestly,' he gasped at last,

pulling himself up straight. His face told a different story. He clung to the railings that separated the buildings from the pavement and repeated the words. 'I'm fine. Just around the corner we should be able to find a hackney.'

She folded her arm over his and helped him to move forwards. She had to get him home. Stumbling and faltering, at last they reached the corner, where several hackney carriages queued to disgorge their passengers. Milling crowds of men and women, whom Lottie thought would be referred to as lightskirts, sallied up and down the pavement, all looking for business, either to purchase or to sell. Nate hailed one of the hackney drivers, and the man, seeing he required help, called to a lad at the corner leaning against his sweeping brush.

'Oi, Toby. Move it. Open the door for this gentleman and his lady.'

The lad dropped his brush and bucket and leapt forward to pull the carriage door open and lower the steps. 'There you are, guv'nor... missus. Pa will take you where you want to go, quick as you like.' The lad tipped the ragged cap on his head and Nate flipped him a coin. Nate gestured for Lottie to enter the carriage first then, after instructing the jarvey of the destination, with what seemed to Lottie like a great deal of effort, he hauled himself in.

A musty unpleasant smell of stale tobacco and sweat enveloped them as they sat down. Lottie sniffed and pulled a face. Nate said nothing.

Lottie broke the silence. 'How are you now, Nate? Shall I send for a doctor when we reach Golden Square?' She anxiously searched his face. He looked all done in. Lying awkwardly on the seat next to her, his eyes were closed and his breathing uneven. He reached for her hand and clasped it to his cheek. She trembled, but not from fear.

'No, I'll be fine in a minute. Just need to...' He sucked in a breath. 'It's been a long time since I ran anywhere, and that termagant kicked me on just the wrong spot.' There was another pause. 'Almost thought I'd pass out.'

He continued to stroke her hand across his cheek. His stubble grazed her skin, but she did not want to pull away. Her heart was racing, not only from the exertion of running but also with joy at this expression of tenderness. A contrast with the rage she'd felt earlier. A rage so great it had almost consumed her. A wave of guilt swept over her. A recognition that her overwhelming anger had propelled her to act as she had, delaying their escape. She'd been so determined to find something to incriminate Ruth Newbody, she'd ignored Nate's instructions to depart at once and landed them both in danger.

'I'm so sorry, Nate. It's all my fault,' she blurted.

His eyes flew open and he sat up straight, letting go of her hand. 'What on earth do you mean? Do take that mask off, I can hardly see your face as it is.'

She fumbled with the fastenings of her mask to obey his instruction. Why, oh why hadn't she followed his instructions earlier?

'Now, tell me what you are thinking,' he asked huskily.

'If it hadn't been for me delaying, we could have been out of there without you getting hurt,' she wailed. 'I feel dreadful. You don't deserve to suffer because of

me. I really thought they'd kill you.'

To her amazement, he chuckled. 'Daft girl. Despite the pain in my leg, and I'm sure it's nothing too serious, I promise you, I've never felt more alive. I've felt useful, a man again. I hate being treated as a useless cripple. I've no liking for the life of a soldier in idleness, and I've certainly no liking for the life of an idle gentleman.'

'Oh.' She swallowed her ready protestation. Well, he didn't seem to blame her for his poor state. Then something of his words registered. 'I hope you don't feel that I treat you as a useless cripple? I assure you I don't think of you as one, but I do worry that your leg...' she paused, uncertain of how to phrase her feelings. 'I mean to say, I know you have a problem with your leg.' He cocked his head to one side waiting for her to continue. 'But I've always considered you... mmm, someone I can rely on. Someone who is strong, in control. You're someone with whom I feel safe.'

She knew she'd said the wrong thing. While she'd been speaking, he'd been gripping her hands in his and looking as if he wanted to devour her. Her insides were melting, then – a shutter came down behind his eyes. He released her hands and looked away for a moment before turning back to face her.

'I'm glad you feel safe with me, Lottie.' It sounded as if he was speaking through clenched teeth, all the emotion and exuberance of moments before leached away to leave bare words. 'I've pledged Wheatley I will look after you. Look, we're back. When we get inside, you run along to your room, and I'll see you in the morning.'

'Don't you want to see what's in those papers we found first?' she asked, letting her disappointment show. What had she said that had caused such a change?

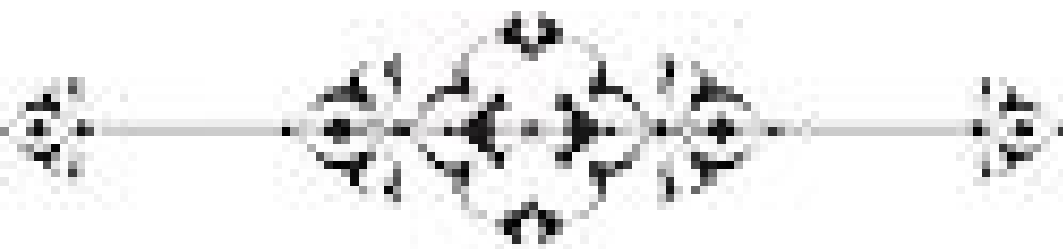
He didn't reply straightaway, but slowly lowered himself out of the hackney, then turned to help her, stretching his arm to lean on the carriage body for support. 'I think we both need a good night's sleep first. I'll lock them up in my room for safekeeping, and we'll peruse them tomorrow, together.'

Lottie nodded her head in reluctant agreement and left him in the hallway. She paused on the half-landing to look down and caught his words to the sleepy-eyed footman who'd been stationed to await their return.

'Bring a bottle of something decent from the cellar to my chamber and then you may retire. I'll see myself to bed. Make sure I'm awakened by nine.'

So, he wasn't going straight to sleep? Sounded like he needed to dull the pain in his leg first. Oh, what had she put him through? Full of self-recrimination and guilt, Lottie resumed her climb up the stairs.

# Chapter 23



IT SEEMED AS THOUGH morning arrived two seconds after her head touched the pillow. Lottie blinked the sleep out of her eyes and turned over to look at the ornate French clock on the mantelpiece. It really was morning, half an hour past eight o'clock, in fact. The sun streaming in through the cracks in the shutters, the noise of wheels on cobbles, and the calls of tradesmen coming from the Square outside her window, had all conspired to waken her. She needed to be awake – awake, and dressed, and downstairs, ready to meet Nate and go over the papers they'd taken.

She pulled the rope to call the maid, and it wasn't long before she was making good use of the jug of hot water and the bar of Pears soap she found on the washstand. She inhaled the aroma, breathing deeply as she soaped her neck and arms, the translucent block gliding over her skin, leaving its evocative scented film. Such decadence to have a bar of soap. A luxury she'd first experienced at Willow End, and of course at Begley Hall. She closed her eyes, transported by the perfume to her garden at home in Oxfordshire. She could almost touch the clumps of pink dianthus and the swaying fronds of lavender.

The clock chimed the quarter hour, bringing her back sharply to the present. She swept away a tear before continuing her ablutions. No point in dwelling on the past. Her home and the countryside around it were no longer an option for her, thanks to Jonah. As a traitor, anything he owned would be confiscated by the Crown.

Soon she was dressed and making her way to the small breakfast room at the front of the house. The room was empty when she entered, no sign yet of Nate. On the sideboard lay several covered breakfast dishes, their contents hidden from view. She had no doubt that they would be delicious; her experience of the cook's creations so far had been more than satisfactory. Whoever owned the house, she assumed it was the duke, employed the best staff.

Deciding to ignore her hunger pangs for the moment and wait for Nate, she wandered over to the window to watch the passers-by. She was so deep in contemplation that she did not hear the door open.

Nate's discreet cough jerked her out of her reverie. 'Sorry. Didn't mean to

lottie you,' he apologised. Dark shadows circled his eyes; he looked as if he had not enjoyed much sleep. She flashed him a smile and was rewarded by the smile she received back.

He moved towards the table, pulling out a chair for her. 'I see you haven't made a start yet.' His hand grazed her shoulder as she sat down; she tingled with warmth even though there was a layer of dress between her skin and his.

'I thought I'd wait for you,' she ventured. She did not want him to think her too bold, wasn't sure if that was what had caused him to draw away from her last night. 'Since I left home, all my meals have been taken in company, with Harriet, your father, Wheatley and Francis... and you, of course. Such a change from dining alone as I've been used to.'

She heard him exhale. 'Of course.'

He went to the sideboard and occupied himself in filling two plates. This took all of three minutes; three minutes in which she squirmed and inwardly fretted. When he turned back to her there was a forced smile on his face and a filled plate in each of his hands.

'Here you are. Let me know if you want anything else. I'll ring for some coffee, or would you prefer tea?' He was being perfectly polite. What had happened?

'Tea would be lovely, thank you,' she answered. Why was he so stilted and reserved? He'd seemed so pleased to see her when he first entered the room; now his smile did not quite reach his eyes, his pleasantries seemed forced. What had she done or said again to make him put up his barriers?

They ate their meal in near silence. Only the most inconsequential comments about the weather were made. Once finished, they went into the library.

'I've instructed the butler and footmen that we are accepting no callers for the time being, certainly no-one who is unknown to us.' Nate's tone was brisk and business-like. 'I mentioned the other day that I thought I was followed back here from Tattersall's, and if I was... well, Mrs Newbody will know where we are and may make an attempt to retrieve her papers. We should also take extra care if we leave the house.' He looked up, his face grim. 'If you need to go out, take a footman with you in addition to a maid.'

Lottie was confused. Was he not planning on accompanying her himself? She would get no pleasure, whatever the purpose of her outing, if he was not with her. Oblivious to her concerns, Nate carried on with what he was doing. He laid the documents he'd been keeping in his jacket pocket onto the large table in the middle of the room. He spread them out. There was an assortment: some contained lists, others were notes in some sort of code, and there was the notebook. Lottie picked up the small leather-bound volume and examined it. She turned the pages over, noting the edges were frayed and showed signs of heavy use. The writing was all in the same small, meticulous hand.

'Each opening has a woman's name at the top,' she said, flicking through the last pages. 'There seem to be notes for each, all dated in chronological order.' She leaned towards Nate. 'See, these look like initials.' As she spoke, she swiped away

a loose lock of hair that had fallen across her eyes. 'There are numbers, do you think they could relate to sums of money? Payments of some sort, perhaps?' She looked up and caught her breath; his green eyes were fixed on her, the expression behind them heated. A moment passed, a moment in which she felt herself drowning in his eyes. She blinked, and the moment passed.

He cleared his throat and held out his hand for her to pass him the notebook. 'Let me look.' His voice was husky. She passed him the volume, her fingers grazing his as she did so. He jerked his hand away as if he'd been burned. 'Sorry,' he mumbled, 'didn't mean to snatch it.'

She moved round the table to be closer to him as he examined the pages that had caught her interest. Her body was almost touching his, her head leaned in, resting against his shoulder.

She pointed to the page. 'There, see. Some initials followed by a number. And a few lines below, different initials and another amount. If you turn over the page there is another girl's name and the same sort of entries. What do you think it all means?'

She shifted to look at him. His face was so close to hers, his gaze intense with longing. His throat moved as he swallowed. She could smell the soap he'd used that morning, see the small nick on his chin, evidence of a hasty shave. She licked her lips, unsure what to say. A groan rumbled in his throat. He leaned slightly nearer and his lips parted. She knew he was going to kiss her. *Oh yes please.*

A knock on the door broke the spell and sent them leaping away from each other. Strangely, she found it difficult to catch her breath. From the way Nate's shoulders were heaving, he too was finding it difficult to get air into his lungs.

'Enter!' he barked at last.

The footman who had been posted at the front door appeared. 'Sorry to bother you, sir.' He handed Nate a card.

'It's Francis,' announced Nate, his voice sounding strangled. 'He and Wheatley must have returned to town. Send him in, please.'

Lottie stepped towards the open window; her cheeks were burning, perhaps the breeze might cool them down. She patted at her hair and smoothed her dress, wondering if it was obvious that she had been not only anticipating, but longing for Nate's embrace. For one incredible moment she had thought he was going to kiss her, if only... She risked looking over to where Nate stood by the table, shuffling the papers around with one hand, while the fingers of his other hand tugged at his neckcloth. His cheeks were flushed.

'There you are. Glad I found you both at home. Any progress?' Francis' cheery tones broke the tension.

They answered in unison. 'Yes.'

Francis gave them both a searching look, then he spotted the items on the table. 'What have we got here? More evidence against Benham?'

'Not sure,' answered Nate. 'Some of it appears to be in code. We met Mrs

Newbody, Benham's contact. She took us to her establishment in St James's. Not the nicest of females.'

Francis' mouth formed a thin line as he examined the papers scattered across the table's surface. 'Yes, so I understand, Wheatley has mentioned her. I believe she tried to blackmail him once. Didn't succeed. Up to all sorts of villainy. The brothel...' he stopped and looked up, 'erm, I do beg your pardon, Lottie, for speaking frankly, is only one of her ventures.'

'That's quite all right, Francis,' Lottie assured him. 'There's no point in euphemisms. I think I saw and heard everything last night that a gently-brought-up lady would normally have no knowledge of.' Francis' eyebrows shot up at her words. 'Don't worry, Nate took good care of me... I was completely safe.' She cast a smile at Nate. Nate grunted.

Francis eyed them both as if uncertain of how things stood between them. 'I see,' he answered finally. 'I told you Major Crawford was a man to be depended on. Now, about these papers?' He drew them together into a neat pile.

Nate explained that they'd just started to look over them and that Lottie thought the notebook was a record of payments received or made from each person represented by their initials. 'I have to say that I agree with her assessment,' Nate concluded. 'I think the name at the top of each page relates to each particular girl and the initials are perhaps their clients.'


Francis grinned. 'By Jove, you could be right, you know. Well done both of you. Nate, why don't you take these over to Wheatley? As you will have guessed, we've moved back to Wheatley House, but I think you'll find him at the War Office. I can take Lottie to see some of the sights of London while you are there.' Lottie was about to voice her objections to this plan, when Francis added, 'I'm afraid the War Office doesn't encourage lady visitors, Lottie. Besides, we will all meet up for dinner. Wheatley insisted that you should both be present.'

Lottie's lips pursed at being outmanoeuvred, but she decided to be gracious. 'In that case, I would be delighted to have your escort, Francis.' Yes, she would so like to see more of London while she was here, but she had been hoping it would be in Nate's company. 'Nate, you will be careful, won't you?' She felt embarrassed asking. But if anything happened to him... she didn't want to think about it. Her question hung in the air. Francis jerked his head up and looked inquiringly at Nate.

'I think I was followed here the other day,' Nate responded. 'Mrs Newbody may attempt to get her papers back, or exact revenge.' He grinned at Lottie. 'We left her a little discomposd, didn't we, Lottie?'

She laughed, glad that he was treating her more normally. 'She certainly wasn't very happy at our leaving when we did.'

'I look forward to hearing all about it,' chuckled Francis. 'Nate, take one of the footmen with you when you go to the War Office. They're all fairly burly chaps here, I know. Lottie will be safe with me. I'm no prize-fighter, but I've got a pistol, and my groom's pretty handy at fisticuffs, so don't worry.'



A short time later, warmly dressed against the bracing spring air, Lottie was in Francis' phaeton, ready to be driven through Hyde Park. His groom, a spry, muscular chap, was seated behind. Lottie had politely requested that the hood be kept down, despite the sharp April breeze.

'I might miss something if the hood is kept up, and this may be my last chance to see the sights,' she explained.

Francis looked nonplussed as he settled her into her seat. 'I'm sure you'll have plenty of opportunities to visit London, Lottie. Unless, that is, you have decided that your future no longer lies with Nate? Are you really going to choose to live the remainder of your life alone?'

She bit her lip and waited as Francis walked around the pair of perfectly matched bays and climbed into his seat next to her. The vehicle tipped slightly as the groom let go of the horses and leapt into his own seat behind. She wasn't sure how to answer. In fact, it was all very confusing. 'No, I haven't come to a decision yet.'

She saw his lip curl into a smile as he concentrated on steering the vehicle through the busy streets. She wasn't up to baring her soul and explaining how Nate puzzled her with his changes of mood. Would Francis even understand? He was another man after all. Possibly all men were the same. No, that wasn't true, Ned hadn't been prone to spells of aloofness. And Jonah had been horrifyingly consistent in his unpleasantness. Perhaps it was just Nate.

They drove in silence for a while, until the traffic thinned, then Francis spoke. 'I thought we might go through Hyde Park. It's not the fashionable hour, but at least you will be able to see it without your view being interrupted by swarms of other visitors and their carriages. Afterwards, if you wish, we could go across to Green Park, and from there make our way to Westminster Abbey. Or if you prefer, we can visit Bullock's Museum on Piccadilly.' He was negotiating a corner as he spoke.

Lottie didn't answer until he successfully completed the manoeuvre. 'I don't think I've heard of that.'

'You'll like it, full of all sorts of curiosities, things brought back from Cook's expeditions, artwork and such.'

'If you don't mind, I think I would prefer to see Westminster Abbey. Nate and I



visited St Paul's yesterday, so it would be a pity not to see that much older place of worship. And your suggestion about the parks sounds lovely to me.'

Yes, she would definitely like to tour the Abbey. It had been there for hundreds of years, it would most likely be there for hundreds more. She needed something strong, immutable, certain, to calm her nerves and to remind her that some things did not change.

Riding through the park with Francis was very pleasant. He was an entertaining and well-informed companion, pointing out all the places of interest. When they reached the Abbey, they left the phaeton in the charge of the groom and wandered round the nave. Lottie expressed a wish to visit the Henry VII Lady Chapel.

'Why?' asked Francis, scratching his head as he consulted his guidebook. 'Or rather, why that one in particular?'

'I wanted to see the memorial to Queen Elizabeth. I understand the effigy is a good likeness.' She wasn't going to tell him that she admired that long-dead queen, such a strong woman, leading her country to victory over the Spanish and ruling with a firm hand when women were not supposed to do anything without a man's authority.

Francis, however, was much more astute than she'd given him credit for. 'I think I understand the real reason,' he chuckled. 'She was a strong-minded female too, wasn't she?'

'I don't know what you are implying,' she bristled. He was far too perceptive.

'I'm not implying anything. Don't fly up into the boughs. I know how difficult life can be when what we want, or who we are, does not fit the norms of society. Believe me, I know.'

She glared at him, but he merely smiled and, without explaining further, sauntered off to examine a monumental inscription on the chapel wall.

Coming out in the sunlight an hour or so later, Francis guided her back to the waiting phaeton. 'I expect you're feeling a bit peckish, I know I am. What do you say we go to Gunter's? It's on the way back. We can even eat outside if you think it warm enough.'

'Oh yes, please. Nate took me there yesterday. The first time ever I tasted ices, it was wonderful.'

A short time later, they were seated at one of the many tables placed under the plane trees of Berkeley Square, partaking of dainty savoury pastries and cups of hot chocolate. Francis drained his second cup of chocolate and leaned back in his seat. Lottie felt his eyes on her and braced herself for his questions. She knew he was going to ask something.

'I think I ought to tell you something about my friend Nate Crawford.'

Well, she hadn't expected that. She swallowed the last of her pastry and looked over at him. 'Really? What do you think I ought to know?'

'Well, it's obvious to me that you do not know him that well, or you would have given me a much more definite answer earlier and, I would wager, an

answer that said you were entrusting your life's happiness to him.'

Her mouth opened in surprise; she snapped it shut again. For once she didn't know what to say. Francis continued. 'I've known Nate Crawford since we were boys. We grew up in the same village. He is the most loyal and courageous of friends. He stood by me when others would despise me.' At her questioning look he explained. 'Forgive me again for being honest, but I believe your sensibilities will stand the truth.' He glanced around, then lowered his voice. 'I am illegitimate. My mother, a lady of impeccable birth and virtue, was ruined by a complete scoundrel who took advantage of her innocence and abandoned her when the results of his actions became quite obvious.' He leaned back in his seat and toyed with the spoon he'd used to eat his ice, on the surface a picture of relaxation. However, his narrowed eyes, rigid mouth, and the pulsing vein in his forehead were evidence to Lottie of the strong emotion the telling of this history was causing him.

'I'm so sorry. That must have been dreadful, for her and for you.' Poor Francis. Life for Lottie had been hard enough with her irascible father, but she couldn't even begin to imagine how hard it would have been without the protection of a father.

Francis sighed. 'It doesn't matter now. My life has changed so much, and for the better. But I wanted you to know that while I was being ostracised and taunted for my lack of parentage, Nate and his family were my steadfast friends. We lost touch after university, he joined the army and I found other work, but I followed his career. He was gazetted several times for bravery, you know?'

She nodded. 'His father told me. I guessed he would not have had a lacklustre career, but he has never spoken of it.' She was fascinated to hear more. Francis waved to a waiter and requested another pot of chocolate. He continued to toy with his spoon, turning it in his fingers, a frown on his face as if considering what to say next.

'We only met up again recently when I returned to London with Wheatley. Nate was working at Horse Guards for a time, before returning to help his father with the estate. He confided in me, told me he was devastated at having to give up his army life. He didn't want to return home to Warwickshire. He felt a failure, Lottie.' Francis flicked his hands open as if to say, 'there you are'.

'What, surely not? How could he? His father said that Nate had been in a bad way when he returned, but thinking himself a failure? Why would he?' She shook her head.

'I think it started with his being wounded. He told me it took a month before he was able to use crutches. Knowing him as I do, that would have been totally frustrating. He was always a restless and energetic fellow. To be unable to move around, or do anything without help, must have been torture.' Francis paused and looked closely at Lottie, as if gauging how much further he should confide. 'I'm trusting you with some information that I have told no-one else, Lottie. Nate didn't swear me to secrecy but, well, it was understood that I would not tell all

and sundry.'

'You can count on my discretion. I can assure you that I have the highest regard for Nate and would never betray any confidences that would cause him harm.'

Francis nodded and continued. 'I believe he was brought so low, not only by his leg wound, but by some of the sights he'd seen, that he even contemplated throwing himself off the ship that was bringing him home. Nate joked about it, but I'm almost certain he was serious; said he couldn't sleep at night.'

All of a sudden it hit her. She understood. Of course – he would have seen terrible sights, they'd be engraved on his mind, ready to rear up when he least expected. It explained why she'd found him on the floor in his bedroom that first night at Willow End. But he'd not disturbed her that night at the inn in Oxford, and all the other times they'd been together. Was he still experiencing nightmares and hiding the fact? No, she was sure she would have known. But to feel so low that you wanted to end it all? She groaned aloud at her stupidity. Had she completely misunderstood him?

She looked up to see Francis' puzzled expression and wiped the frown from her own face. 'Thank you for having the courage to confide in me. I see I have completely misjudged him. I don't mean with regard to his bravery and integrity, you understand, but, well... I had no idea, you see.'

Francis cracked a smile. 'I knew that telling you was the right thing to do. He is not a martinet or a cold, unfeeling man. If things had been different...' He tailed off and seemed embarrassed. Lottie wondered briefly what he meant, but she was now consumed with planning how to broach matters with Nate. It would be up to her to break through his reserve. If she misjudged his feelings for her and made a fool of herself, so be it, she could deal with the pain. He was dealing with far, far worse.

They continued with their chocolate and their conversation, but this time on a more neutral subject.

'Does Wheatley own many houses in London?' asked Lottie. 'The one in Golden Square is so elegant. I've never seen such fine furnishings. He has exquisite taste.'

The colour rose in Francis' cheeks. 'Yes, he owns a fair amount of property, both in town and around the country. But that particular house belongs to me.'

A puzzled expression crossed her face, quickly replaced by an embarrassed smile. 'Oh, I had no idea. I'm sorry, I just assumed it belonged to the duke.'

He tapped her on the back of her hand. 'You are wondering how a mere secretary and someone with my background could possibly afford such a property.'

'Oh, no indeed,' she stammered.

'Don't be embarrassed. Last year, when Wheatley was ill, he gifted it to me. He said he did not want to think of me being impoverished and homeless, unable to obtain another position if he were to die. But very happily, he recovered from his illness. Even so, he insisted that I keep the house.'

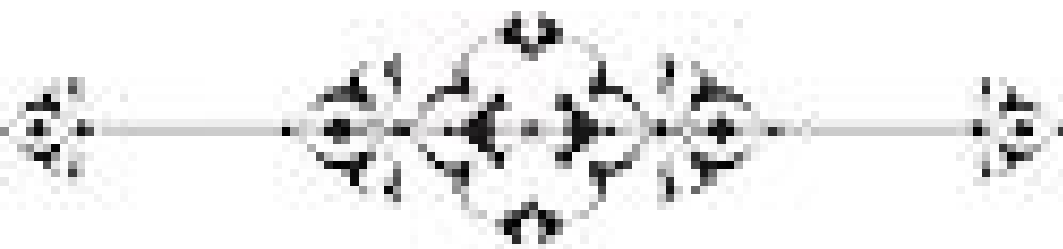
‘That is not likely to happen, is it? You not being able to find another position? I mean, an experienced and intelligent gentleman like yourself would always be sure of patronage?’

He gave a rueful chuckle and patted her arm. ‘If only the rest of the world thought as you do, Lottie my dear. I’m afraid the circumstances of my birth are an obstacle to many of the aristocracy even acknowledging me, never mind offering me employment. Also, the fact that Wheatley is my patron is an obstacle to others.’ He ignored her questioning look. ‘However, I am very happy to say I have relatives who do acknowledge me. Nate was instrumental in us becoming acquainted, in fact. I now have cousins and even a grandmother who is happy to sponsor me about society. She is the Dowager Viscountess Easterby, the mother of the man who would not admit to fathering me. She is a lovely, caring lady, and I would be pleased to introduce you to her.’

Lottie was overwhelmed. ‘That is very kind of you. She must be an exceptional female to ignore the dictates of society. I would be very honoured to meet her.’

Francis nodded his head. ‘She is indeed, a true force of nature.’ He stood up and offered his arm. ‘Come, it is getting chilly. I shall escort you back in plenty of time for you to prepare for dinner.’

# Chapter 24



NATE WAITED UNTIL FRANCIS and Lottie had departed before collecting the papers to take to Wheatley. He watched them leave from the vantage point of the breakfast room window. Lottie's face had been animated, chatting with Francis, who smiled back at her. A pang of jealousy shot through him, which was just as quickly quelled. Francis was not interested in Lottie, of that Nate was certain. Nevertheless, Nate questioned why his own interactions with her always seemed to end in embarrassment or stilted words.

Last night he'd been swept away with love and desire. She'd been stroking his face with soft gentle fingers. He'd been in heaven. He'd been buoyed by her words; she thought he was strong, in control. He'd almost convinced himself she was going to fall into his arms and confess her love for him. But no, she'd gone on to say she thought he was safe. Safe, for goodness' sake. Like an elderly uncle or a docile pet.

He wanted her to see him as her hero, a lover, a husband... not someone safe, blast it. For one glorious moment, energy had coursed his veins, a sense of invincibility, then – crushing disappointment. And just now, he was sure if they had not been interrupted, she would have allowed him to kiss her. God, he longed to kiss her, feel her lips part beneath his and taste her.

He pulled his thoughts together. He needed to concentrate on the task in hand, not his confused feelings for Lottie. He shoved the packet of documents into his pocket and headed off to hail a hackney, omitting to call on the services of a footman. He could take care of himself and didn't need a nursemaid.



It did not take long to reach the War Office. He clambered out the vehicle awkwardly and, leaning on the new cane that Francis' resourceful butler had provided, he hauled himself up the steps to the main entrance.

After several frustrating minutes spent negotiating with a number of different personages who seemed intent on impeding his access to Wheatley, he was finally ushered into an impressive well-appointed office. Behind the large desk, the duke lolled in his seat, perusing documents passed to him by a young gentleman in the uniform of a subaltern.

Wheatley's eyes flicked over to Nate, who stood smartly to attention. 'Ah, there you are, Crawford. Do take a seat, I'll be with you in a moment.'

Nate walked with measured steps to the chair Wheatley indicated. He resisted the impulse to let out a deep sigh as the weight was taken from his bad leg and busied himself in placing his cane next to his seat. After a few moments more, the subaltern was dismissed with an instruction that they were not to be disturbed.

'Now, Crawford. What news do you have? No, don't get up, I just need to stretch my legs, been sat down at this damned desk all morning.' Wheatley rose and sauntered around to lean on the side of the desk facing Nate, his slim booted legs crossed, and his arms outstretched either side.

Nate wondered whether Wheatley's valet used champagne to polish his boots; they gleamed spectacularly, he could almost see his face in their polished surface. He raised his eyes to Wheatley's face. The man's normally bored expression had been replaced by the hint of a smile and hooded eyes glittering with anticipation. Nate reached inside his pocket and pulled out the bundle of papers and journal. 'I have these. Taken from an establishment in St James's, the one run by Mrs Ruth Newbody. Francis intimated that you have had dealings with her in the past.'

Wheatley's eyes narrowed at the mention of Ruth Newbody's name and he took the papers out of Nate's hand. His eyes flickered away from Nate's. 'Ah, yes. I've indeed had dealings with that woman. A more evil creature I have never met, I think. And believe me, I've been evil in my time, Crawford.'

*Interesting.* Nate wondered what the duke's dealings had been with her. And he did not doubt that Wheatley was acquainted with evil; well acquainted, in fact. Nate's friend Richard had told him the whole sorry story of Wheatley's erstwhile plans for a certain family who had crossed him. It wasn't many years ago when rumours had abounded about Wheatley's depravities and misdeeds. But these were now all in the past; he was now apparently a reformed character. Could a leopard really change its spots?

Wheatley finished his brief perusal of the documents. 'So, Mrs Newbody was indeed the main contact, and Benham's dealings with her were more than just commerce of the carnal variety?'

'Yes, Your Grace. We arranged to meet at the Pantheon masquerade. She was preparing to install Lottie in her establishment – some arrangement she had come to with Benham.' He spat out the name. The thought of Lottie at the mercy of that woman made his guts churn.

Wheatley gestured to the papers. 'She deals in espionage too. A traitor.'

'Indeed, but we met no-one else and she did not mention an accomplice. We did not have time to discuss that side of things, as I'm afraid my false identity was exposed. A fellow officer recognised me. It was a bit of a close call.' That was an understatement. He would have been killed and... no, he would not think about what might have happened to Lottie.

'I shall arrange for Newbody to be watched more closely. We had her under observation for other reasons, but now this confirms that she has added espionage to her list of misdemeanours.' Wheatley picked up the small journal and flicked through the pages. 'This appears to be an account book of some sort, a list of payments.'

'Miss Benham thought so too,' answered Nate.

'Yes.' Wheatley's voice took on a goading tone. 'How are things with Miss Benham? Are you still planning marriage, Crawford, or has she decided freedom is more attractive?' Wheatley's silver eyes glinted in amusement and Nate really wanted to draw his claret.

Instead, he answered evenly, albeit through gritted teeth. 'I'm not sure what Miss Benham's plans are now. She may well decide that living an independent life is her preference.'

'But what is your preference, Major Crawford? Come on man, own up! Are you really such a cold fish?' Wheatley cajoled. It seemed he was determined to irritate. He succeeded.

Nate stood up, ready to leave. 'If you don't mind, Wheatley, I prefer not to discuss the matter further.'

'Sit down, Major. Don't take offence so easily,' soothed Wheatley. 'Here, we'll have a drink. Brandy, is it?'

Annoyed with himself for being so easily riled, Nate resumed his seat. 'As you wish.'

Wheatley strolled over to a small table under the window, where several decanters and a selection of glasses stood on a silver tray. He removed the stopper from one and poured two generous measures. He sauntered back and passed a glass to Nate. 'France's finest, make the most of it. We intercepted it on its way to a certain noble house in Essex. Pity to let it go to waste. Your health.'

They clinked glasses and each man savoured the aroma of the amber liquid before taking a mouthful. Warmth was soon spreading down Nate's throat and into his innards; it really was the finest he'd tasted. The tension in his shoulders eased slightly, the ache in his leg eased. He looked up to see Wheatley observing him.

Before he had time to feel uncomfortable, Wheatley spoke. 'Listen to me, Crawford. I do not often confide in people, but you have been a true friend to Francis, and I know you are a man of integrity, so heed my words.' Wheatley turned his gaze towards the window, as if he did not wish Nate to see his face while he spoke. 'Sometimes we must make ourselves vulnerable, to show the

person I care for what we feel. And that is difficult, I know.'

Nate couldn't believe his ears. Wheatley lecturing him on personal matters. He froze as the duke continued to speak. 'I can see you are a man who keeps his emotions under control. You have had to, in order to lead your men, to convince them to follow you to hell and back. And from what I have learned of you in dispatches, you have been to hell and back, haven't you?' Wheatley leaned back on the desk and rested his hand holding the glass on the polished wooden surface. He was looking straight at Nate, holding his gaze. Nate sat impassively, only the muscle twitching in his throat signalling his discomfort. He wasn't going to exchange reminiscences of war with anyone, least of all Wheatley.

At Nate's continuing silence Wheatley shrugged. 'Never mind. I'm getting off my point. You've taken risks, haven't you? In battle, regardless of your safety. You've done so, because you thought the outcome was worth the risk. Am I correct?' Nate nodded once, wondering when he would get to the point. Wheatley's next words shook him out of his composure. 'Is Miss Benham not worth the risk? I've noted how you look at her. An informant present at last night's little performance told me how you both worked as a team to manage your escape. She is an exceptional young woman, isn't she?'

Nate almost choked on the slug of brandy he'd just swallowed. 'Yes, of course she is. But never mind that, you say you had someone present last night?' *Hell and damnation!* 'Why did he not help? Miss Benham could have been harmed.' Nate was yelling now, but he didn't care. 'Ruth Newbody had a pistol trained on her, for goodness' sake. Good Lord, I don't believe it!'

The arrogance of the man stunned him. It was bad enough that he'd tricked them into going to Gretna, when he knew they would fall into Jonah's path and where Lottie's life had been at risk. Then he'd manipulated them both to take further risks, without thought to the potential cost to Lottie's reputation, and indeed her life. Now he had the gall to admit one of his agents could have helped. Nate couldn't help himself; he stood up, drew back his arm, and planted his fist in Wheatley's face. It felt good.

Wheatley's glass flew off the table and brandy spread over the polished parquet floor. Wheatley himself was flung sprawling backwards across the table. Nate rubbed his knuckles and waited.

For a moment Wheatley lay there motionless. 'Don't just stand there. Help me up.' Nate didn't quite believe his ears. He stretched out his arm to Wheatley and jerked him upright. He was past caring; being rough would make no difference. A trickle of blood oozed from Wheatley's nose and he pulled a lace handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket to stem the flow.

His eyes glittered at Nate. 'I suppose you know I could have you hanged for that?' Nate stood his ground and said nothing. 'Don't glare so, Crawford. I acknowledge I deserved it.' There was a long pause as Nate waited to hear his fate. Wheatley stuffed the bloodied handkerchief back in his pocket. 'We'll keep this between ourselves.'



Nate blinked. So Wheatley did have a human side. He wasn't always the puffed-up, arrogant aristocrat that he pretended to be. Wonders would never cease.

'To get back to last night,' Wheatley continued, his voice sounding rather more nasal. 'My informant told me you both seemed to have it all in hand. That person was quite prepared to step in should it have been needed, but it would have meant revealing their identity as my agent. As it turned out, you did not require help.'

Only slightly mollified, Nate grunted.

'Now... Miss Benham,' resumed the duke. 'Why do you not make your feelings for her clear? It is surely not because of your leg? She strikes me as a lady of sense who would take no account of something like that. And it was you she came to find, after she escaped her cousin in Wetherby, was it not? Not the action of a lady who holds you in low esteem.'

'I suppose you are right,' Nate acknowledged, still not quite believing he was having this conversation. How much had he had to drink last night?

'What harm would it do to tell her how you feel? Faint heart and all that.' Nate wanted to pinch himself; was Wheatley really giving him advice about his love life? 'Take another risk and tell her. It won't be any greater than the one you took just now.' Wheatley rubbed his chin and gingerly felt his nose. 'You're a soldier after all. There, I'm done giving advice.' He picked up papers from the desk behind him. 'Give this to Miss Benham. Papers granting her an annuity for life, enough to live on, should her inheritance not come through. Her bravery for her country deserves nothing less. By the way, it is hers regardless of whether she decides to marry or not.'

Nate fumbled for his cane, which had rolled away when he'd stood to punch Wheatley. In a daze, he placed his glass on the desk and secreted the papers in his pocket. His thoughts were all over the place. He still wasn't entirely sure if he was dreaming. Nevertheless, he bowed. 'Thank you, Your Grace.'

As the door closed behind him, he was unaware of Wheatley's satisfied smile.

After an uneventful journey back, and still puzzling through his interview with Wheatley, Nate waited for the front door of the house on Golden Square to open at his knock. It wasn't like the household staff to be so tardy. Growing impatient,

he turned the knob and pushed; the door opened. He stepped inside the deserted hallway, hearing too late the click as the door closed behind him. 'What the...?' were his last words before a heavy object made contact with the back of his skull and he lost consciousness.



Lottie was laughing at something Francis had said as the phaeton pulled up outside the house on Golden Square. She had enjoyed herself, despite not being in Nate's company. Now, thanks to Francis, she had a better understanding of the man. She was determined to speak to him before they set off for dinner. Was there a future for them as man and wife, or was she truly too much of an unconventional female for this man of so many conventions? This evening she would find out.

Francis handed her out of the vehicle and led her up the steps to the front door. A footman opened the door.

'Where is Jones?' asked Francis.

The man shifted uneasily. 'He took ill, my lord. I'm filling in for him on Major Crawford's orders. He told me to tell you he is waiting for you in the library, my lady.'

Lottie noted the flicker of surprise that crossed Francis' face and felt him squeeze her hand. Was he warning her? She didn't recognise the footman and she'd made a point to meet all the staff on the day of her arrival. The man also didn't seem to have a clue about her correct title. She withdrew her hand and smiled up at Francis.

'Goodbye, Mr Heslop. Will you be calling tomorrow as you promised? Do bring the puppy you were telling me about. We can let him have the run of the garden.'

Francis looked at her. She hoped he understood what she was trying to tell him. At last, she saw comprehension in his eyes. 'I'll be round first thing, my lady. The garden sounds like a good idea.'

He bowed and made his way down the steps to his phaeton, and after some brief words with his groom he waved a cheery goodbye and set off.

Lottie turned a bright smile on the footman. 'I'll just go upstairs to remove my pelisse and hat. I'll join Major Crawford in a moment.'

To her relief, the man did not demur and had no inkling of her suspicions. He nodded and lumbered over to sit in the porter's chair. Lottie's heart sank; from

there he would have a clear view of both the front door and the stairway. She would have to think of something.

She forced herself to tread slowly up the stairs. She even attempted to hum, but her throat was too dry. Once on the first floor, she quickened her pace and made for her room. Her heart thumped in her chest and her hands shook as she untied the ribbons of her bonnet. Where was Nate? Was he really waiting for her in the library? Had he been injured? She guessed Mrs Newbody had something to do with it, seeking her revenge and the retrieval of her papers. Nate had been correct about being followed. If only they'd been more alert to the danger the woman posed.

Flinging her hat on the bed, Lottie picked up the poker from the grate. Her fingers shook. She'd had nightmares since Penrith about hitting someone with a poker. She reprimanded herself. *Lottie Benham, don't be a ninnyhammer. Nate Crawford needs you. That woman can't be allowed to win.*

Her resolve bolstered, she gripped the poker and went to the disguised doorway leading to the servants' stairs. With light steps she made her way to the ground floor, every so often stopping to listen. All was strangely quiet. At the bottom, she opened the door inch by inch, until she could see into the hallway leading to the service rooms. It was deserted. No sound came from the direction of the normally busy kitchen. She tiptoed across the corridor to peer inside. It too was deserted. Holding the poker aloft, she entered, checking behind the door for anyone lying in wait. She'd been caught that way before.

A scuffling sound alerted her; it was coming from the pantry. She slipped round the large table that stood in the centre of the kitchen, barely noticing that pots still bubbled on the range. She put her ear to the pantry door. Scuffling, a thud, then a groan. She turned the key in the lock and pulled the door open. In the darkness, she made out the figures of the cook, the scullery maid, and the two housemaids. All were tied to chairs. There was no sign of the housekeeper, and she was sure one of the footmen was missing. The remaining footman, one she recognised, lay on the floor. Still tied to his chair, he had obviously tried to wriggle free of his ties and had toppled over. Lottie rushed back outside and grabbed a large knife lying on the table next to a half-jointed chicken.

She knelt down and sawed through the footman's bindings. He rubbed at his wrists and pulled the gag from his mouth. 'Thank you, Miss. They knocked Mr Jones over the head, he is lying there, I'm not sure if he's...'

'Shh, here, take the knife and release the others. Mr Heslop will be here shortly, he's gone for help,' she whispered. She hoped Francis had understood her coded message. She went over to where the butler lay on his side. Putting a hand on his chest, she felt it move. She spoke over her shoulder to the other occupants.

'Don't worry. Mr Jones is breathing. We'll get help for him as soon as possible. Now, do you know what has happened to Major Crawford?'

The footman shook his head. 'No. He hadn't returned when we were attacked. It's just us four today, that's how they managed to overpower us. Mr Jones sent

Bill over to Wheatley House, they were short-staffed there and it's Mrs Gainsborough's afternoon off. She's visiting her sister. We've been here well over an hour now I reckon, Miss. They tied us up and locked us in.'

The creak of a door opening came from the kitchen. Lottie hurriedly pushed the pantry door to, so it would appear as if it was closed. Footsteps sounded on the flagged floor. Whoever it was, they were heading for the corridor. She pulled the door open a crack and saw with relief Francis creeping round the table, a pistol in his hand.

'Ssss, Francis.' He spun round at the sound of her voice.

'Good grief, Lottie. You scared me. What are you doing with that poker?' She lowered her arm, not realising she'd had it raised ready to strike. Behind her, out of the pantry came the footman. 'Jim, what has happened? Is everyone all right?' Francis asked.

'Yes, sir. I mean no, sir. They hit Mr Jones over the head, he is still unconscious. But Miss here says he is breathing.'

'How many are there?' cut in Lottie. They needed to know how many intruders they had to deal with.

'Two, I think, Miss.' The footman scratched his head. 'And a woman. She has a pistol. They came in through the kitchen door. One of them took Mr Jones' coat, I heard her tell him to wait by the front door.'

She quickly calculated – one man in the hall and another with Mrs Newbody, presumably in the library.

Francis spoke again. 'I've sent for help. You come with me, Jim. We'll try and deal with the chap in the hallway. Lottie, you stay here. Hide in the pantry. Once we've got reinforcements, we'll sort the others out.'

Without waiting for her answer, Francis headed off down the servants' corridor towards the front hallway, closely followed by Jim, clutching a large cast-iron pan. Lottie rolled her eyes but knew there was no time to waste on feeling aggrieved. She went back into the pantry and spoke softly to one of the maids, who was still quivering with nerves even though she had been released.

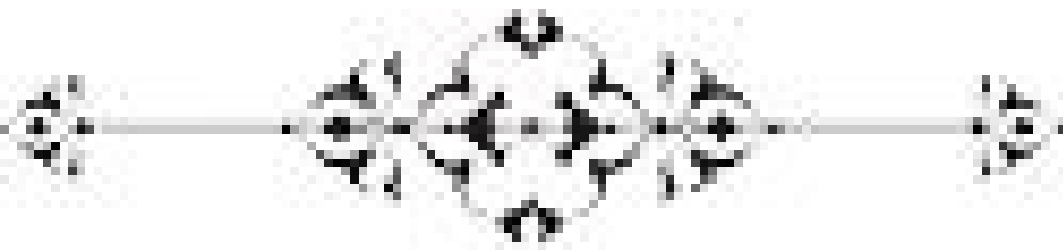
'Quiet, Sally. Pull yourself together. Now show me the servants' route to the library, if you please. It leads to a door to the right of the fireplace, does it not?'

'Y... y...yes, Miss. But you're not thinking of going in on your own are you, Miss? That woman has a pistol. She's dangerous.' The maid continued to quake, wringing her hands.

Lottie took her firmly by the arm and pulled her out of the pantry. 'Come, we might not have much time. Just show me the door and I'll go on my own. I don't expect you to stay with me.'

The maid snivelled and pointed with a shaking hand to a doorway halfway down the corridor on the left-hand side. Lottie set off, hoping she was not too late, the poker still clutched firmly by her side.

# Chapter 25



NATE WONDERED WHY HE couldn't move his arms – and why did his head ache so abominably? He could hear a woman's voice; it was harsh, grating... definitely not Lottie's. He cracked open one eye and then wished he hadn't. Ruth Newbody's face loomed in front of him, a face hazy and obscure, before gradually coming into full terrible focus. She really was in the room with him. He started to lurch to his feet but couldn't. Comprehension dawned; he was tied to a chair.

'So, you've decided to join us again, Mr James? Or should I call you by your real name, Major Crawford?' She was standing by the fireplace, a pistol in her hand and a smug expression on her face. A ruffian, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and sporting grazed knuckles, stood next to her. Nate saw he was in the library but couldn't remember how he had got there. He had a vague recollection of punching someone... but that was Wheatley, surely? His stomach lurched. Where was Lottie? He tried to turn his head, but it was difficult.

'Tell me the name of the woman you were with, Crawford. I want to speak to her,' Ruth rasped in his ear, her breath hot on his neck.

He wanted to slap her away. Instead, he raised his eyes and shot her a look of pure venom. 'Never.'

She inclined her head in a signal to her man, and Nate felt his head explode. A few seconds later, when the flashing lights and the pain subsided, he realised he'd been punched by a prize-fighter. He could barely open his eyes, and something warm and wet trickled down his cheek.

Ruth was speaking, but she wasn't addressing him. 'Do join us, gentlemen, the more the merrier. Come in, both of you, and close the door. No need to stand on ceremony. Put your pistol on the table, sir, or I will shoot your friend here.'

*Thank God. Not Lottie. That woman must not get her hands on Lottie.* Nate let out a groan that sent Ruth Newbody cackling.

'Had enough yet, Crawford? Tell me who that bitch is and how she can be found. She will pay for what she has done.' She waved her pistol hand towards her henchman. 'My man here has plenty more strength in his arm to persuade you, if you don't speak now.'

Nate looked up sufficiently to see that it was Francis, together with a footman,

who had joined them. Francis must have moved too close, for Ruth turned and swung the pistol in his direction.

‘That’s quite far enough. Slide the pistol over to me, then sit over there where I can keep an eye on you. I assume you have incapacitated my man at the front door. You’ll pay for that. Over there, now.’ She gestured to two straight-backed chairs against the wall, to the left of the door.

Nate watched as Francis edged sideways towards the chairs. Then he stumbled, drawing an exasperated sound from Ruth Newbody. ‘Really, do you think I’m going to fall for that old trick? You’re a bigger fool than you loo—’

There was confusion, an explosion of noise, and suddenly Lottie was there beside him.



The servants’ door swung open with a crash, and Lottie launched herself into the room. She’d heard Ruth Newbody’s taunting voice and had correctly visualised her position by the fireplace. Swinging the poker, she brought it crashing down on Ruth’s arm. There was a loud explosion, a scream, a flash of light. Lottie felt someone brush past her, knocking her off balance. Her head caught on the fender as she went down.



She could hear voices. Voices, many voices. What had happened? She remembered creeping along the dimly lit corridor towards the library door, a brilliant flash, the smell of gunpowder, then blackness. Something stroked her cheek. That was nice, a soft, gentle, caressing touch. She heard a voice whispering close to her ear. ‘Lottie, my Lottie, don’t leave me. Please don’t leave

me. I can't live without you, my love.'

*No, it couldn't be. Was it really Nate? He'd been trussed up, tied to a chair.*

She opened her eyes, then quickly closed them again. The light hurt. Her head ached. Her body was being cradled against something solid and warm. The smell of a man's shaving soap wafted to her nostrils. It reminded her of... she couldn't quite recall. The darkness closed in again.



Lottie opened one eye. Where was she? The quilt covering her was familiar. She was in bed, in the bedchamber in the house belonging to Francis. How did she get there? She moved her head slowly and felt someone take her hand.

'Lottie, you're awake at last. How do you feel?' The voice was familiar.

She opened her other eye, blinked, and looked again. A battered and bruised face stared back at her. Her heart jolted in shock. Nate. What had happened to him? He looked as if he'd been in a mill and come off worst. His eye was swollen and bruised, the colours ranging from dark blue to vivid purple. His lip was split, and his nose did not seem quite as straight as she remembered.

'Oh, what did they do to you?' she croaked.

'Shh, I'm fine, just a few bruises, that's all.' He stroked her hand. 'You need to lie still for a bit. You took a bit of a tumble and banged your head, but you're going to be all right.' His voice sounded different. 'What a brave soldier you would have made. But you took such a risk. Why did you not stay hidden and safe? Here, sip this, the doctor prescribed laudanum, said you needed to sleep.'

She took a sip from the glass he held to her lips, then pushed his hand away. 'That's enough, I don't want to sleep for hours.' Her head was beginning to clear, the events coming back to her, but they were muddled in her mind. 'What happened exactly? That woman, has she been caught? She was going to shoot you, wasn't she?' Her questions came out in short staccato bursts.

Nate put the glass down and took her hand. 'She escaped in all the confusion. You knocked her arm, the gun went off, and the ball hit her accomplice, killing him. She must have pushed past you, knocking you into the fireplace.' His voice went hoarse. 'I couldn't get to you. Oh, Lottie, I thought she'd killed you. I thought you were dead, like all the others.' Still clutching her hand, he bowed his head till it rested on the bed, his face on the coverlet. She could feel his shoulders heaving.

*Lord, he is weeping.*

She tried to wrap her arms round him, but her muscles wouldn't work. Her heart ached for him. 'Nate, Nate, don't be upset. I'm still here. I'll always be here for you, if you want me.' She brushed her fingers through his hair.

He raised his head and looked up at her, his eyes fearful. 'Of course I want you, Lottie. But are you really sure you want me? I'm a broken man. My leg doesn't work as it should. I couldn't keep you safe in Penrith. I barely managed to keep you safe the other night. You've come to my aid twice now, when it should be me rescuing you.' He paused before adding. 'And... I have terrible dreams. That night when you found me on the floor – well it wasn't the first time I'd suffered night terrors. Until I met you, they tormented me almost every night.' He swallowed. 'You're better off without me. You can be independent. If any female can, you can. Wheatley has arranged for you to receive an annuity as a reward for your bravery. You can have what you want... your freedom.'

The effects of the laudanum were beginning to make themselves felt, her tongue wouldn't work. Before she could answer, Francis arrived, only knocking on the door to alert them to his presence as he stepped inside the room. 'Wheatley wishes to see you, Nate,' he announced. 'Lottie, you're awake at last. My goodness, your swift action saved the day. I wasn't sure we would all survive. If you hadn't made your move, Nate or I would be dead, I'm sure. Isn't that right, Nate?'

'Indeed yes,' croaked Nate, who still had his back to Francis and was gazing steadily at Lottie. 'I've just been telling Lottie that she can now be an independent gentlewoman. There is no need for us to be married.'

Francis sent him an odd look but didn't say anything. Lottie could only shake her head to show her disagreement. Her eyelids were lead weights, she could not keep them open. And Nate – the silly, wonderful man – he wanted her!

Nate stood up, gave her hand one final squeeze, and spoke over his shoulder to Francis. 'Let Wheatley know I'll be down in a minute, Francis, there's a good chap. I seem to have got something in my eye. Need to go to my room, it's watering like the devil.' He took a handkerchief from his sleeve and, with his head lowered, brushed past Francis and out of the room.


Francis shot a concerned look after his friend, then stepped nearer to the bed where Lottie lay. She was still awake – just. 'What was that all about?' he asked. 'Did I interrupt something? My timing is not good, is it?'

'Want to... marry... need to speak...'

'Don't worry.' Francis patted her hand. 'Meant to tell you, Grandmamma will be arriving shortly. To add some respectability to my household, she says. If I tell her that Nate is not to leave until you've spoken, she'll see to it. Very determined lady is the dowager.'

Francis, realising that he was speaking to himself, tiptoed out of the room.





The next time she awoke, Lottie checked with the maid, who assured her that she had not slept the week away. Relieved that it was only twenty-four hours since the terrible episode in the library, she swiftly dressed and made her way downstairs. She opened the door to the breakfast room, hoping to find Nate, but came to a halt as a diminutive lady, her silver hair piled in an elegant knot and covered with an intricate lace cap, turned away from her position by the window to face her. Something in Lottie's mind stirred, something about a dowager viscountess, someone's grandmother. Before she could work it out, the lady waved her in.

'Come here, my dear. I'm so pleased to see you are well enough to leave your bed. My grandson told me you received a severe blow to the head.' Lottie hesitated as the formidable lady moved towards her. 'Don't stand on ceremony, my dear. Come and sit down. I am Francis' grandmother, and you must be Miss Benham.'

Lottie executed a curtsy, then felt herself being steered towards the table. 'I am much better, thank you, my lady. I'm sorry to disturb you. Shall I return later?' She wasn't sure she was up to an interrogation, and this lady, despite her fragile looks and warm concern, had bright, alert eyes that seemed to miss nothing.

'Nonsense, my gel. Take a seat at the table next to me. I've been waiting for that rascal grandson of mine to join me, but it seems he is still out. Gone to Lock's for a new hat, I'm told. Took Major Crawford with him and said they would not be long, but I've waited long enough.'

The dowager shook her head in a gesture of exaggerated disgust and walked over to the fireplace to pull the bell rope for a servant. 'When you're my age, you don't want to waste time waiting, believe me. I'll let the kitchen know we are ready to eat. Hope you've got a good appetite, Miss Benham. You look as though you need a good feed.'

Before she knew it, Lottie was seated next to the dowager. Jim the footman and Mr Jones the butler, who now sported a bandage on his head, rushed backwards and forwards, bringing dishes for the dowager's inspection and piling portions of eggs, ham, sausages, and slices of bread as that lady directed onto Lottie's plate.

'Really, my lady, I have sufficient,' Lottie protested as the dowager indicated to

Jim to place one more slice of ham on her already-overloaded plate.

‘Nonsense. You’ve been ill, haven’t you? Nothing like a good breakfast for setting one up for the day. Better than resting in bed, bleeding, and cupping, and all that medical faradiddle.’

Lottie, lost for words, looked down at her plate and decided she needed to make a start, or she would be there all week. She was quite sure that the dowager would have no compunction in insisting that she cleaned her plate.

As they ate, the dowager subjected her to questions about her family and her reasons for being in London. Lottie was happy to divulge information about her family background, carefully glossing over her reasons for leaving home. No need to let everyone know about Jonah’s treachery. She explained that she had been assisting the Duke of Wheatley in a matter of importance to the safety of the country, but stressed that she was sworn to secrecy about the details.

The dowager gave her a shrewd look. ‘I know, I know. You think an old woman like me is too sensitive to deal with some matters. Never mind. I won’t push you. My dear granddaughter treats me the same. Thinks I won’t be able to cope with all the details of the hardships she endured before she was restored to me. My dear late husband sheltered me from things I ought to have known. So misguided. So much trouble could have been avoided.’ She sighed, a momentary faraway look in her eyes, then turned her gimlet look back to Lottie. ‘Now, I understand from Francis that you wish to speak with Major Crawford before he leaves?’

‘Yes, my lady. I fear he suffers from a misunderstanding and I... I wish to ensure that it is cleared up.’

The dowager smiled and patted Lottie’s arm. ‘Don’t worry, Miss Benham. I shall arrange for you to have a private interview with him, but only ten minutes, mind. I hope you can sort your misunderstanding out in that time. If you can’t, I will think you a complete ninnyhammer. And I’m almost certain you are not one of those.’

It was while the ladies were enjoying their second cup of coffee that voices could be heard in the hallway. Lottie’s heart started to race. Nate and Francis had returned. She put her cup down, almost spilling the contents, her hand was shaking so. She rose from her seat, seeing the dowager stand.

‘Sit down, gel. I’ll send Major Crawford in and will delay my grandson on some fool’s errand.’ The dowager moved with alarming speed for an elderly lady and opened the door before the two men had managed to cross the threshold. ‘There you are, Francis. I’ve been waiting for you. Good morning, Major Crawford.’

The dowager took Francis firmly by the arm, and before that bewildered man knew what was happening, he was facing the opposite direction. ‘Come along, Francis, your breakfast can wait a minute or two. You must help me find the latest copy of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*. There is an article I must show Miss Benham, and your library is in such disarray I could not lay my hands on it earlier.’

Francis' body jerked, and Lottie guessed that his grandmother had administered a sharp pinch. 'Of... of course, Grandmamma,' he stuttered, a hint of laughter in his voice. 'Yes, I'm afraid it is a bit untidy in there. You go ahead, Nate. Your servant, Lottie. I'll join you both in a moment.'



Nate heard the door close firmly behind him and his heart sank. Here he was, trapped with Lottie, who looked as discomfited as himself. After his revelations of the day before, he was certain she would not want to spend any further time with him. He forced himself to act as if there was nothing the matter.

'Good morning, Lottie. Oh, I apologise, I mean, Miss Benham. I expect I should be more formal now and will not presume to use your first name.' He walked awkwardly over to the sideboard, leaning heavily on his cane. His leg was having one of its bad days. If he could busy himself with choosing something to eat, perhaps she would not see the anguish in his eyes.

He almost dropped the serving spoon when he felt a touch on his sleeve. Why had she moved to stand so close to him? Too damned close. He could smell rosemary and rosewater. He tried to sidle away, but having propped his cane against the sideboard, he was without support and swayed about, trying to keep his balance.

'Let me help you.' She removed the spoon from his grasp and smiled up at him, a twinkle in her eyes. 'I think we would make a good team, you and I, Major Crawford.' She bit her lip and he held his breath, unable to speak. 'Nate,' she purred, and his heart almost stopped. 'That is, if you want to spend the rest of your life with me. Do you?'

He opened his mouth then closed it again. What could he say? Of course he wanted to say yes. 'You could do so much better than me, Lottie,' he muttered.

'Nonsense, I don't want anybody else.' Her voice lost its seductive tone. 'I wish you would stop thinking of yourself as imperfect, Nate. We are all imperfect. I can be impetuous. I dread to think what could have happened if you hadn't rescued me on the way to Oxford.' This was more like the Lottie he knew: straightforward, brave, honest, a mixture of weakness and strength... and so adorable.

'But you rescued me,' he argued feebly. He couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. Did she want him after all?

'I think we rescued each other. Fate brought us together. Let us continue together. Permit me to care for you when you are not well, and you may protect and care for me when you are.' She chuckled. A delightful husky sound that sent tingles up his spine. 'I think I will get the better of the bargain. You're steadfast and true, and you have courage.' He was about to remonstrate, but she hurried on before he could speak. 'It's true. You had the courage to trust in me and allow me to help with Wheatley's plan. Not many men would have done so.'

'Hmmm. He bamboozled both of us. It's a good job you're brave, Lottie. We'd have both been in the suds but for your action.' It was true. His instincts had told him that she was a brave little thing. Somehow, he'd known that Lottie would stand firm.

'Are you truly sure you want me, Lottie?' He had to be certain. 'You don't think of me more as an uncle or a father figure?'

'Whatever gave you that idea?'

'On the way back from Ruth Newbody's... you said I made you feel safe.'

'Well, you do. I know you will protect me. But that doesn't mean... I mean, I don't think of you as an uncle.' Her cheeks were pink, and her eyelids fluttered. He'd definitely unsettled her. He raised his hand and stroked her cheek. She swallowed and looked up at him through her lashes. He couldn't resist. It was now or never. He leaned nearer and kissed her mouth, at first gently, then more forcefully, savouring the taste of her. His mouth moved across her cheeks and he whispered in her ear.

'Will you marry me, Lottie?'

'Mmmm, oh yes, Nate, I will.' Her arms had gone round his neck, his hands caressed her hair then moved lower to press her body into his. He heard her moan, deep in her throat.

*Lord, this was heaven.*

A cough brought him to his senses. He turned to see Francis at the door, shielding his grandmother from the scandalous sight of him almost devouring his darling Lottie. Lottie leapt away. Nate smiled at her swollen lips, rosy tinted cheeks, and dishevelled dress – it was obvious she had been thoroughly kissed.

'Ah, there you are, Nate. I see Lottie is helping you to the best dishes,' temporised Francis.

The dowager was not fooled. She peered over Francis' shoulder. 'I see you have cleared up your misunderstanding with Major Crawford, Miss Benham. I take it we are to wish you happy?' Her tone was stern, but there was a definite twinkle in the dowager's eye.

'Yes, my lady. Miss Benham has consented to be my wife and make me the happiest of men.' Nate folded his arm round Lottie's shoulder and brought her forward to be kissed on the cheek by the beaming dowager.

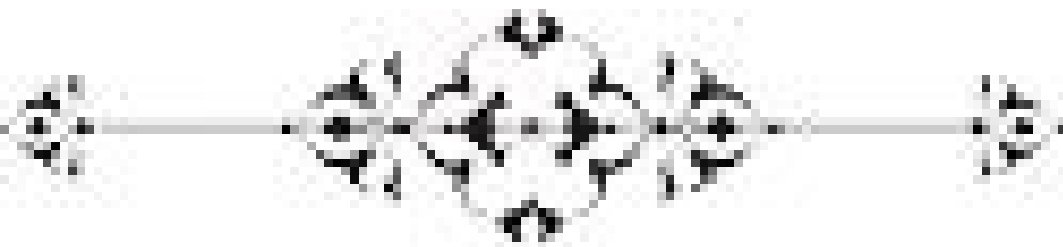
'Very glad to hear it, my boy. She seems like a sensible girl, and every man needs a sensible female to manage him. Is that not right, Miss Benham?'

Lottie stifled a giggle. 'Yes, my lady. It just takes some of them longer to realise

that fact.'

Nate snorted, and the dowager laughed. 'You're a gel after my own heart, Miss Benham. You must meet my granddaughter when she returns from her wedding trip. I'm sure you'll both get on well together. And of course her husband is an old friend of Major Crawford's.' She grasped Lottie by the arm. 'Do come with me, dear. We'll leave the gentlemen to break their fast. It seems that you and I have a wedding to plan. I do so like a wedding.'

# Chapter 26



THE FOLLOWING DAYS AND weeks passed by in a whirl for Lottie. When the dowager heard that Lottie did not have an older female relative to guide her, she insisted that Lottie remove to her town house and took charge of nearly all the arrangements for the wedding.

But the dowager did not have it all her own way; she met her match in Wheatley. In his high-handed way, he had stipulated that the wedding itself was to be held in his Grosvenor Square house, not St George's. He even arranged for a special licence to be issued. Glad that he had been forgiven for punching the man on the nose, and also guessing that Wheatley wished to make amends for the shameful way he had manipulated events, Nate was happy to comply.

Lottie, however, had been very firm on the choice of her wedding dress, much to the distress of the dowager, who had wanted her to have a far more extravagant confection. She chose a simple high-waisted gown of cream lace over a pink satin underdress. It had long sleeves and a very short train, a feature on which Lottie had graciously conceded to her patroness's wishes. The dowager, together with the modiste, had overruled Lottie on the matter, both insisting that some sort of train would be necessary for such an important occasion.

In the meantime, Nate remained at Francis' town house, and he and Lottie had only been permitted to meet when in company. It had been a strain on his nerves. Every time he and Lottie were together, he was beset by anxiety that she would change her mind. In the times that he was not being feted by old army colleagues on his upcoming nuptials or being escorted by Francis to tailors and bootmakers to be measured, prodded, and fitted for his wedding clothes, he performed exercises to strengthen his leg. He was determined to wed Lottie without relying on his cane.

Mr Crawford joined his son in London a few days before the wedding. Almost as soon as he arrived, he took Nate to task. 'Well, this is a fine to-do and no mistake, Nate. I thought something terrible had happened to you and Lottie when the duke's message arrived.' He paced up and down, speaking his mind and barely pausing for breath. 'He said you had planned on going to Gretna, but something had occurred, and I was not to worry. Not to worry? I ask you, what

father would not worry? And no word from you for over a week. And now you are to be married in the duke's London house. Well I never. Poor Harriet, I mean Miss Spencer, wrote to me to ask if I had any news. I didn't know what to tell her.'

Nate knew he deserved his father's scolding and wore a suitably penitent look, but his ears pricked up at his father's use of Miss Spencer's first name. Questioning his father obliquely, he discovered that Miss Spencer had left to stay with her cousin in Leamington shortly after he and Lottie had departed. She had been reluctant to return to her own cottage in Knowle in case Jonah turned up, and she had been eagerly anticipating news of their return and the planned church wedding at Hampton in Arden.

According to the elder Mr Crawford, relating the story to Nate, it was better to visit the lady and tell her in person that there had been a delay. Truth to tell, he informed Nate, he had missed her quiet company; a more pleasant lady he'd never been acquainted with – apart from Nate's dear mother of course.

Then Mr Crawford sheepishly admitted that he was thinking of asking for her hand in marriage. What did his son think? He wasn't too old, was he? Wasn't touched in the attic?


Nate clapped his father on the back. 'Of course you're not too old, Father. I'm happy you've found someone to share your life with. I know how lonely you've been since Mamma's death. Lottie speaks very highly of Miss Spencer, and from the little I know of her, I think you will be well suited.' He paused and gave his father a lopsided smile. 'Despite appearances to the contrary, I've been quite worried about you, you know.' He poured them both a generous measure of Francis' very fine brandy and handed one of the glasses to his father.

'I could say the same about you, you rascal,' answered his father. 'You've no idea how anxious I was when you first returned from Portugal. It was as if the very life had gone out of you. I can see Lottie has been good for you, you have that spark back. She's such a lovely young lady.' He slanted his eyes towards his son. 'By the way, when is Miss Spencer coming down for the wedding?'

Nate chuckled. 'Wheatley has sent a carriage for her, and she will be arriving tomorrow. We are all to have dinner together at his town house.'

'Lovely, lovely.' Nate waited for the next question. 'Do you think Miss Spencer would welcome my escort round some of the sights of London?'

*Good grief, Father is as nervous as a young man courting his first love.* Suppressing a smile, Nate answered the question he knew his father had really been asking. 'If she's anything like the caring person she appears to be, she will be honest and tell you if you are wasting your time courting her. But I don't think you need worry on that score, Father.'



Lottie and Harriet were reunited the following day. Lottie was ready to usher her friend to her bedchamber to rest, but Harriet declared she was not too tired from the journey, the duke's carriage being so comfortable she'd barely noticed the miles speed by. She was very ready to sit and have a gossip with her dear Lottie.

Lottie gave Harriet a highly censored account of everything that had happened since leaving Willow End; there was no mention of kidnapping, or masquerades, or brothels. She knew her friend would be scandalised to hear how many disreputable places she'd visited and what she'd had to do.


'Now answer me truthfully, my dear.' Harriet leaned close as Lottie sipped her tea. 'Are you truly happy to be marrying Major Crawford? I formed the impression that you were not overjoyed with his proposal when we were in Warwickshire, and that you only accepted because you had no alternative. If that is still the case, listen to me.' Lottie put her cup down and Harriet took her hand. 'I will renew the offer I made to you at Willow End. You are very welcome to come and live with me at Knowle. I shall be on my own, my sister is now living in her husband's house, as you know. I must admit, I have been a little lonely since she left. I have been staying with my cousin and her family. They made me very welcome, and it was lovely to spend time with their children, but I did rather miss adult company.'

Lottie gathered from this explanation that Harriet's cousin had expected her to keep the children occupied, the fate of so many unmarried ladies. Harriet continued. 'Such a contrast to our pleasant evenings at Willow End, with just the four of us. Mr Crawford senior was such a kind and thoughtful host.' Her eyes had a fixed faraway look, as if recalling something pleasurable, then she shrugged and came back to the present. 'I digress. My offer still stands, Lottie.'

Lottie smiled at her friend. 'You are exceedingly kind. But I must refuse your very generous offer. There is nothing I want more than to marry Major Crawford. We have come to understand one another better because of the trials we have been through. I misjudged him, taking his stern exterior as a reflection of the inner man. He is the very opposite I have found, Harriet.'

Harriet put her arms round Lottie and hugged her. 'That is wonderful, my dear. Your mamma would have been so happy to see you settled, and I am overjoyed for you too. You deserve your happiness.'





Lottie and her companions were greeted by Nate and Francis, who had both been lingering in the hallway of Wheatley House, awaiting their arrival. Nate was holding his cane, though its use now was merely ornamental. His efforts with the leg exercises had paid off. But he did not want to discard it just yet, wanting to surprise Lottie on their wedding day.

‘You look enchanting, Lottie,’ Nate whispered as he took her hand. ‘Lady Easterby, thank you so much for bringing Miss Benham. You have been very kind to take her under your wing.’

‘Don’t try and butter me up, my boy. No need. Miss Benham has been a pleasure to be with. You’re lucky to have her, Major. Make sure you look after her, or you’ll have me to account to.’

Miss Spencer’s eyes had widened at this exchange. Lottie blushed, being unaccustomed to such lavish compliments.

Nate laughed, and Francis smiled. ‘Now, Grandmamma. Don’t try to intimidate our guests, they’ll run away.’ He turned to Harriet and spoke with easy charm. ‘Miss Spencer, good to see you again. You are looking very well. His Grace is eager to meet you. Let me take you to the drawing room and you can meet our other guests. I believe there is someone present who you already know.’

Francis offered an arm each to Harriet and the dowager and, under the impassive gaze of the butler, proceeded to lead both those ladies up the stairs to the first floor. Nate and Lottie followed behind, though when they reached the first-floor landing, Nate led Lottie off to the left, as his friend conducted the two ladies in the opposite direction.

‘Where are we going?’ asked Lottie, frowning.

‘Wheatley requested that we meet him in his private quarters before joining the other guests. I think he wants to let us know what has happened since our little adventure.’ Nate gave her arm a reassuring pat.

He led her along a passageway and opened a pair of polished wooden doors that opened onto a library as magnificent as the one at Begley Hall. Bookcases lined the walls, and at either end of the room stood a marble fireplace, a snarling lion’s head carved into the centre of each mantelpiece.

Nate pointed them out. ‘The lion’s head is the Wheatley heraldic beast, you’ll find it all over the house. Look, even on the spines of his books.’

They approached another set of doors and Nate gave a light tap to announce

their presence.

‘Do come in, Major Crawford. Miss Benham, welcome.’ Wheatley was sitting on a large black leather chair, which had been extended so that he could recline his legs and feet whilst using it. ‘Do forgive me for not getting up. I’ve been rather busy of late and it’s set my health back somewhat. Francis insists that I rest as much as possible, so I use this to humour him.’ He chuckled. ‘But I see he is not with you, so...’ He swung his legs off the chair and stood up. He was dressed in his habitual black, a magnificently multicoloured embroidered waistcoat the only colour on his person.

Smiling at Lottie, he gestured for her to follow him towards a table to one side of the fireplace. ‘You are looking very well, Miss Benham. My sister is looking forward to renewing her acquaintance with you. In fact, she has spoken of nothing else since her arrival. She is so excited to be attending your nuptials. Just hope she isn’t thinking of getting married herself, she’s far too young.’ He started to sort through some of the papers that were laid out on the desk.

‘I will certainly advise her that she should delay thinking of marriage for herself, Your Grace. That is, if you think I have any influence on her,’ Lottie answered hesitantly.

Wheatley looked up. ‘What? Yes, you made a great impression on her, Miss Benham. However, you are getting married tomorrow, and I’m sure Major Crawford would object if I induced you to put off your wedding in order to be a companion to my sister.’ He arched an eyebrow at Nate and his lips curled in a sardonic smile.

‘Indeed I would, Wheatley. It has taken us a long time to get to this point,’ answered Nate.

Lottie grinned at Nate. ‘I’m afraid nothing would induce me to put off my wedding tomorrow, Your Grace.’

Wheatley laughed. ‘Ah well, never mind. But tell me, Miss Benham, do you think your friend Miss Spencer would consider acting as a companion to my sister? Francis tells me she seems a very level-headed woman, and I understand that she was your governess and companion for some years. The results of her tutelage...’ here he nodded in Lottie’s direction, ‘highly recommend her to me.’ Lottie blushed. It seemed it was going to be an evening of blushing.

Before she could answer, Nate interrupted. ‘I wouldn’t broach the subject with her just yet, Wheatley.’ At Lottie’s questioning look, he quickly added, ‘I understand that she may have other opportunities presented to her shortly.’

‘What? Better opportunities than those which being a companion to a duke’s sister offer?’ Wheatley’s eyes narrowed, and he stared at Nate for a moment. Nate held his gaze but said nothing further. Lottie wondered what silent messages were being passed between the two. ‘Very well,’ said Wheatley at last. ‘I will not speak to the lady about the matter for the time being. We will see what better offers she receives.’ His face remained impassive, but his eyes twinkled.

Wheatley got to the business in hand by proceeding to outline the progress his

staff at the War Office had made in deciphering the papers taken from Ruth Newbody's desk. It seemed there was an extensive spy network at large in the country, but thanks to their efforts, most of its members had now been identified.

'Now we know who we are dealing with, we can keep them under surveillance, even feed them false information. It's all worked out very well, thanks to you two. In fact, His Majesty is so pleased, he has instructed that you, Major Crawford, are to be granted the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, a Knight Grand Cross.'

Wheatley had spoken in his usual disinterested drawl, so it was a moment before his words registered with Nate. 'Me? A knighthood? But why? I only did what anyone would do for their country. In fact, Lottie deserves it more than I do.'

She saw him glance at her, his eyes glowing with love. He deserved the honour. He'd fought for his country and was still suffering for his brave actions. What they'd accomplished at Ruth Newbody's was nothing compared to Nate's actions on the Peninsula and at Talavera.

'His Majesty was also advised of your exploits on the Peninsula,' continued Wheatley. 'He knows you were mentioned in dispatches several times for your bravery at Corunna and Talavera. The honour is for all your actions in the service of your country, Major Crawford. Although I, too, think Miss Benham is due acknowledgement. She has certainly been brave.' His silver eyes rested on Lottie. There was a gleam in them as he addressed her. 'Perhaps being known as Lady Crawford will be sufficient recompense, Miss Benham?'

'Goodness. I would be just as happy to be known as Mrs Crawford, I can assure you. But I am so happy for you, Nate, you deserve it.' She clasped Nate's hands in hers; he still looked bemused, poor man.

Wheatley picked up some sheets of paper off the table. 'Just to finish here, as I'm sure my guests are wondering what is keeping us. The journal you found... well, its entries did seem to correspond to the brothel's patrons, several of whom were being blackmailed. Discreet visits have been made to these patrons, first to confirm their identities – you'd never believe how coy some people are about their proclivities – then to warn and advise them to either change their habits, or at the very least take more care in their choice of establishments to patronise.' He laughed, not very nicely. 'Then of course, there is Mrs Newbody.' Wheatley paused, and Lottie found she couldn't breathe. 'I had men stationed around the clock outside her house, and those of her known accomplices, but there has been no sign of her. It seems she has disappeared off the face of the earth.' Lottie wondered how long she could remain upright... the thought of that woman running loose terrified her. 'However, I have also received a report that a woman's body has been fished out of the Thames, near Southwark.' Lottie started to breathe again.

'Good Lord,' interjected Nate. 'Could it be her?'

'I asked the Runners to persuade one of her girls to look at the body.'

Apparently, the face had been badly damaged. It is thought she must have jumped or been pushed off a craft plying the river, and then been struck by an oar. But the girl has identified the clothes as belonging to Newbody, so for now, we must assume she is dead.'

A shiver went down Lottie's spine. 'Good riddance. She was an evil woman.'

Nate placed his arm round her shoulder. 'She is gone now, my love.'

'What is going to happen to my cousin, Your Grace?' Lottie had been thinking about Jonah's fate. Was he to be hanged?

'Ah, yes, your cousin. Not a man of many scruples. He is to be transported for his sins. Ten years.' The duke sniffed. 'If he survives.'

Lottie had one more question. 'Excuse me, but... but, what is going to happen to my family home? I assume it will revert to the Crown, in view of Jonah's treachery. Is that correct?'

'Miss Benham, I said earlier that you deserved some reward for your bravery.' Wheatley's eyes lost their coldness; beneath hooded lids, they were almost twinkling. 'I convinced His Majesty that it would be more suitable to grant you the deeds, rather than bestow them on some undeserving fellow with no connection to the land.' Wheatley's mouth turned up at the corners. 'Happily, he agreed with me. To sum up, the deeds to your family property will be handed to you, once His Majesty's clerks have finished sorting all the legal business.'

Lottie was speechless; her home would remain hers forever. She barely heard the rest of Wheatley's words.

'Major Crawford, you will shortly be receiving notice of when the ceremony for your knighthood will take place. I understand that His Majesty is keen for this to be done as soon as possible. He has been quite unsettled by all this Burdett business and concerned that his subjects are plotting revolution, emulating the events in France. Fortunately, thanks to your efforts, we now have our eyes on those who would take advantage of any unrest.' Wheatley finished with the papers on his table. 'There, that seems to be everything. Francis is very good at organising my notes, I don't know what I'd do without him. Come, let us join my other guests.'



Taking a still-dazed Lottie's arm, Wheatley escorted them back through the library to the large drawing room, where their friends and family awaited. Their

entrance attracted everyone's attention. Wheatley would have caught everyone's eye no matter the occasion, but in Lottie's opinion Nate was by far the more impressive.

Wheatley held his hand up for silence. He needn't have bothered; all conversation had ceased. 'May I present to you Sir Nathaniel Crawford, Knight of the Grand Cross of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, and Miss Charlotte Benham, his betrothed. Welcome everyone.'

He waved his hand for people to continue as they were and stalked off towards Francis, who had been engaged in conversation with the dowager. There was a buzz of conversation as people surrounded Nate and Lottie, clapping him on the back and congratulating him on his honour.

His father came over, Harriet Spencer on his arm. Both looked a little flushed. 'Well, Nate my boy. To be knighted, eh? Well done and well deserved. I'm so proud of you, as I always have been, I may say. What wonderful news, eh, Miss Spencer?'

'Yes, it is. Congratulations, Major Crawford. How lovely, Lottie. It augurs well for your life together. I'm so happy for you, my dear.'

Nate, unaccustomed to being praised in public, merely smiled and nodded in acknowledgement. He really needed a drink, or better yet, a quiet secluded corner where he and Lottie could have a moment to themselves. Lottie kissed her friend then saw the dowager, who was waving to her from across the room. Nate reluctantly released her arm so she could go and join her. He watched as she walked away, her silken skirts swaying gracefully.

He was not on his own for long. Francis strolled over, his face wreathed in smiles.

'You knew, you sly dog, and never said a word.'

Francis shrugged and continued to smile. 'Couldn't. Not the done thing. Besides, not sure I'm in favour of it.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'll have to call you Sir Nate.'

Nate dug his friend in the ribs. 'Just Nate or Crawford will be fine, we grew up together, for goodness' sake. This changes nothing.' Francis grinned back at him.

The rest of the evening was passing all too quickly. Nate so far had only managed a few private words with Lottie. He kept a covert eye on her all night and noticed when she left the drawing room after dinner. He caught her on her way back from the ladies' retiring room and persuaded her to accompany him to the library, anticipating it would be deserted. She didn't require too much persuading. Closing the door behind him and dropping his redundant cane, he swiftly caught her arm as she was about to wander away, drawn by the shelves of books. 'What, you'd sooner look at books than stay close to me?' he teased.

'Of course, how often does one get the opportunity of examining a duke's magnificent collections?' she answered, looking at him sideways.

He loved it when she played the coquette. He was the happiest he'd ever been,

relaxed and at ease with himself. He moved closer to her and she nestled into his arms and looked up at him. A lingering, smouldering look passed between them. Then their lips touched. Such a wonderful feeling. He couldn't say how long the kiss lasted, time meant nothing. At last they broke away from each other.

'Mmm, that was good,' he whispered. His heart was pounding, his breathing erratic. By the flush to her cheeks and the heaving of her bosom, he could see she was similarly affected.

'Only good? I'll have to do better next time. Come here,' she teased. She stepped back into his arms and wound her hands behind his neck, pulling his head down again. He pressed her body into his. God, how he'd longed to do this, for days, weeks, now. Tomorrow, after they were wed, he would have her all to himself. One glorious night to themselves in the London townhouse – his father had arranged to stay with the duke – and then he was going to take her away, surprise her with a wedding trip to the West Country. He knew she longed to travel. It would just be the two of them, and this time they would not misunderstand each other. He would not hide behind his façade of army officer. No, those days were behind him.

She felt soft, warm; her perfume, light, reminded him of spring, the time when he had met her. How she'd changed his life, given him hope, something to live for. How could he ever have thought of doing away with himself? And now he had her to share his life's journey with, his darling, brave Lottie. Tomorrow night could not come soon enough, then he would have all of her. He reined his thoughts in; he couldn't return to the drawing room in his present state of arousal.

He gently pulled away and stroked her face. 'Darling, only one more night and we will be together forever.'

'I know, but it seems like an age away,' she murmured. 'You know, I once believed you were only marrying me out of duty.' She chuckled, a delicious warm sound that made his insides quiver. 'You're not though, are you? You do have feelings for me.'

'God, if you only knew how much I love you. I've agonised every night, in terror that I would receive a letter from you saying you had changed your mind.' His voice had gone husky with emotion.

'No, never, my dearest Nate. I've never felt this way about anyone before. You've trusted me. You've allowed me to help you and you've let me be myself. That takes a very brave, strong man, Nate. To trust and love someone enough to let them be themselves.' The warmth of her breath made his skin tingle as she nuzzled into his neck.

'As if I could have stopped you,' he muttered into her hair as he stroked her cheek, drawing his fingers slowly over her lips. 'You are a force of nature. You exploded into my path and you've led me a merry dance across Lancashire, Yorkshire, and London, and I expect you'll continue to do so. I've enjoyed dancing with you and want to carry on for evermore. But promise me one thing.'

‘Anything.’

He needed to break the erotic spell she was casting over him for one last time. Tomorrow night he would enjoy surrendering to all his desires... and hers too.

‘You will slow down occasionally and wait for this old soldier to catch up, won’t you?’

It worked. She pulled back and looked up at him. ‘What? You’re no old soldier, you are my masked hero, the man I know I can always rely on, who’ll always be there for me. As I will be for you.’

‘Oh, love.’

They kissed again, both feeling as though they had made their real wedding vows, alone and in private.

The clock on the mantel chimed midnight and, realising that they must be dismissed, they made their way with some reluctance back to the drawing room. Nate lingered in the corridor for a few moments after Lottie returned, so that there would be no coarse comments or ribald laughter. He was sure there would be if they returned together.

When he slipped into the room some minutes later, the raised eyebrows of his host and a knowing wink from Francis were the only indications that anyone suspected he and Lottie had had an assignation. His eyes sought her out. She was seated between the dowager and Lady Elizabeth; the flush on her cheeks and a stray curl loosened from its pins betrayed her recent activity. He crossed his fingers and hoped those two normally observant ladies would not see the evidence. Nate made his way to the sideboard for a much-needed drink. He was getting married in the morning after all.



The following day arrived bright and clear. A slight shower in the very early hours of the morning gave the air a freshness, and the sky was a cloudless blue as Lottie departed the dowager’s town house for her wedding. Unlike the dowager, who fussed and took an age before she was satisfied with her own, Harriet’s, and Lottie’s appearances, Lottie was very calm. She knew she was doing the right thing. She loved Nate and was certain of his love for her. The rest of her life would be shared with him, nothing else mattered.

Wheatley was waiting as the dowager’s carriage drew up in front of Wheatley House, and he escorted Lottie up the steps into the black-and-white marbled

entrance hall. They waited there as Francis took his grandmother's arm and Mr Crawford escorted Harriet to the grand state drawing room, where the ceremony was to be performed.

Wheatley, elegant as ever in his ubiquitous black and silver, leaned his head down to Lottie's ear and in his lazy drawl whispered, 'Well, Miss Benham. Last chance, do you want to make a run for it? I can have my carriage whisk you away, should you wish.'

Lottie looked up and saw the wicked gleam in his eye. 'Definitely not, Your Grace. When one has found a treasure, one should keep it close. I have found my treasure in Major Nate Crawford.'

'As you wish, Miss Benham. Come then, I'm sure the archbishop will be wondering when he is going to get his breakfast, and Major Crawford will be ready to challenge me to a duel if I delay you much longer. I've never seen a man so tightly sprung.'



Nate stood up, sat down, then stood up again and looked towards the doors for the hundredth time. Where was she? She must be here. Miss Spencer and the dowager were both here, so she must be here. She wasn't persuading Wheatley to loan her his carriage because she'd changed her mind, was she? No, not Lottie. She would have owned to having doubts last night if that was the case and she certainly had not done that. He looked at the clock on the mantel. It showed a quarter past the hour.

He turned at the sound of the doors opening and then she was there, on the arm of Wheatley, who for once was not the main focus of everyone's attention. Lottie looked stunning, a vision in a dress of cream lace with pink embellishments.

She paused to adjust her skirts, the rustle of her silks the only sound in the hushed room. Wheatley led her towards Nate, who was now only vaguely aware of the presence of other guests: his father, beaming from ear to ear; the dowager and Miss Spencer, both holding handkerchiefs, ready to wipe eyes brimming with happy tears; Francis with an enigmatic smile on his face – all faded from Nate's attention as he watched Lottie step towards him.

At last she reached his side and he remembered to breathe again. Her perfume subtle and light, her smile tremulous and shy, he took her hand in his. The



universe shrank to just the two of them.

'Your cane?' she whispered. She had noticed.

'Don't need it. Not all the time anyway.' A smile and squeeze of the hand. A slight cough from the archbishop brought them both back to the present and the familiar words of the wedding ceremony began. Mere minutes later:

'I now pronounce you man and wife.'

At last, they were married. The laughter and cheers had them both embarrassed and flushed.

'Kiss her. Go on.'

That was his father, he was sure. Lottie looked up at him, cheeks pink, eyes sparkling, and biting her bottom lip.

He leaned forward and took her face in his hands.

'Mine at last,' he whispered before kissing her.

'You're mine too, don't forget,' she answered when their lips finally parted. 'Always and forever.'

**The End**



# *Also by Penny Hampson*

## *A Gentleman's Promise*

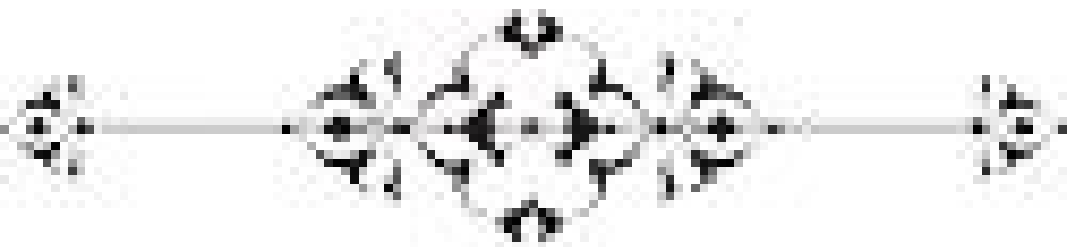
Emma has struggled across a Europe devastated by Napoleon to get her brother back home, but when she arrives she finds her family all but destroyed.

She meets a stranger who claims the estate now belongs to him. Who is this man? Emma doesn't know. What she does know is that it would be madness to fall in love and surrender her freedom...

Richard never wanted the title and estate he's now inherited. He hadn't even known of his connection to the family until his solicitor revealed it to him. But when Emma and her brother turn up claiming to be the estate's rightful heirs, he can't ignore his suspicions. Nor can he ignore his growing feelings towards Emma. Could she be the woman he's been searching for?

Independent and strong, Emma never wants to marry. Richard is looking for a docile, obedient wife. Can their quest to catch a killer teach them that what they both wish to avoid is exactly what they need?

# *About the Author*



HAVING WORKED IN VARIOUS sectors before becoming a full time mum, Penny Hampson decided to follow her passion for history by studying with the Open University. She graduated with honours and went on to complete a post-graduate degree.

Penny then landed her dream role, working in an environment where she was surrounded by rare books and historical manuscripts. Flash forward nineteen years, and the opportunity came along to indulge her other main passion – writing historical fiction. Encouraged by friends and family, three years later Penny published her debut novel *A Gentleman's Promise*.

Penny lives with her family in Oxfordshire, and when she is not writing, she enjoys reading, walking, swimming, and the odd gin and tonic (not all at the same time).

You can follow Penny on Twitter at: [@penny\\_hampson](#)

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